

THE SECRET
OF
HALAM
HOUSE

A MYSTERY STORY FOR GIRLS



NINA BROWN BAKER



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THE SECRET
OF
HALLAM HOUSE

A MYSTERY STORY FOR GIRLS

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A Mystery Story for Girls

BY

NINA BROWN BAKER

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ILLUSTRATED BY

F. J. BUTTERA



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THE SECRET OF HALLAM HOUSE

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TO THE REAL
BERNICE, NATALIE,
AND NINA — “NANCY”



“AH, HOW DO YOU DO, GIRLS?” — *Page 12.*

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THE SECRET OF HALLAM HOUSE

CHAPTER I

THE ARRIVAL

The Chicago train puffed away from the little country station, leaving the three Enfields standing rather uncertainly on the platform, surrounded by the luggage which the porter had hastily piled out during the brief stop.

Any one, seeing them there, would have known them for father and daughters. Mr. Enfield was tall and thin, with dark eyes in which a smile always lingered, even when he was most serious. Bernice was very like him; dark, with smooth, shining hair, and eyes the velvety brown of a pansy. Nancy, the younger sister, resembled the other two in features more than coloring, for she was very fair, with floating golden curls and eyes of cornflower blue.

“Great-Uncle Peter’s lawyer wrote that he would meet us,” Mr. Enfield said. “I wonder — oh, here he is now, I think.”

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A gaunt, bearded man was making his way toward them. "Isn't he the very picture of Abraham Lincoln?" Nancy whispered to her sister. "Sh!" Bernice whispered back, "He'll hear you." "But it's a compliment, really, because—" "Honey, do *hush!*!" "Oh, well, if you're going to get elder-sisterish!" Nancy subsided, and waited demurely while the gentleman introduced himself to Daddy. He was Mr. Charlton, the lawyer who had written to tell them of their inheritance, and he explained now that he had a car waiting to drive them to Hallam House.

Mr. Enfield presented his two daughters, and the lawyer turned his solemn gaze upon them.

"Ah, how do you do, girls? And how old are you?"

"Sixteen and fourteen, Mr. Charlton," Bernice answered politely, while Nancy squeezed her hand meaningly. The sisters had a theory that grown-ups who didn't really care for young people always began by asking their ages. "My gracious!" Nancy thought inside. "If they only knew how tired we get of it! Wonder how they'd like it if we did it? 'And how old are you, Mr. Charlton? I hope you are a good

little man?" " She giggled a little at the picture, and Bernice pinched her arm warningly.

Fortunately, Mr. Charlton had turned to lead the way to his car. He had picked up one of the suitcases; Daddy took the other big one, and the girls followed, each with her own smaller bag. The trunks would have to wait until they could get some one to deliver them.

" I expect you'll find Rosemont pretty slow after Chicago, Mr. Enfield," the lawyer was saying. " We're just a sleepy little Mid-Western town, and we don't make much effort to keep up with city ways."

" All the better!" Daddy answered cheerfully. He swung the suitcase into the back of the battered flivver and turned with his foot on the step. " Peace and quiet are exactly what we're looking for. As I told you in my letter, I'm planning to write a book this summer. Having this house left me by Great-Uncle Peter came as a heaven-sent opportunity to do the work I've been planning for years."

" Um, yes, you did speak of a book." Mr. Charlton motioned the two girls to the back seat, and began arranging the luggage in the small space left for it. " I believe you said you

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were giving up your newspaper work to write a — er — yes, a textbook on political science, wasn't it? You think that it will prove profitable?"

"I doubt it," Daddy answered promptly. "Certainly it will be no best-seller. But it's a subject in which I am deeply interested, and I have some worth-while things to say. I've been gathering my material for years, and this blessed legacy has made it possible for me to get at the actual writing at last."

Mr. Charlton looked doubtful. "Well, authorship is a chancy business, at best. And to give up a paying position — my late client's estate amounted to practically nothing, you know, aside from the house and his Egyptian collection. Too bad he willed the collection to the University — it would have brought you a tidy sum."

"I thought it was very generous of him to leave me the house, considering that he had never even seen me."

Mr. Charlton looked even more doubtful. "Perhaps, but I should not advise you to count too much upon the house, Mr. Enfield. Frankly, I have little hope of finding a pur-

chaser for it; it is too big and too old-fashioned. I cannot help feeling, Mr. Enfield, that you were a little rash in giving up your position with the newspaper."

"Oh, well, it's done now," Daddy laughed cheerily. He had taken his seat in front beside Mr. Charlton, and the noise of the starting motor almost drowned his words. "At least Uncle's gift assures us of shelter, and I've a little money saved. We'll manage, won't we, girls?"

"Of course, Daddy!" The sisters spoke together. They had followed every word of the conversation with indignant interest. This Mr. Charlton didn't seem to believe in Daddy's Book! Why, it was going to be the most wonderful book in the world! Senators would read it, and governors, and even presidents. The girls knew all about it. Well, not all about the book itself, exactly, because it was pretty deep. But about how Daddy had been planning, and making notes, and just waiting till he could be free of the office and write. Even before Little Mumsey died — and that was when Nancy was only six — they'd heard of the Book. Manage? Of course they would.

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As they rounded the station and rattled up Main Street, impulsive Nancy gave a squeal of delight.

“Oh, it’s adorable! Look at the big trees growing right out of the sidewalk. In Chicago they’d have cut them down, instead of going around them that way, wouldn’t they, Sis? And the quaint little stores — and oh, look, there’s a horse and buggy. It really *is*, just like in the movies!”

“And the girl driving is wearing a sunbonnet,” Bernice contributed. “That’s the first time I’ve ever seen one, except in a picture. Oh, and look at the old dog taking a sun bath in the very middle of the street. Don’t you just love that?”

Quickly they left the business section behind, and drove past old-fashioned houses with wide verandas, smothered in climbing roses and honeysuckle. Great elms arched over the unpaved street, making a cool green tunnel. Above the rattle of the car came the high twittering of birds; white butterflies flashed in sunlit spaces. To the city-bred girls, it was a new world.

“Hallam House is out on the edge of town,”

Mr. Charlton was telling their father. "Your great-uncle built it in the '80's for a promised bride who jilted him. It is quite a romantic story."

The word "romantic" caught Nancy's ear, and she leaned forward so that she could hear the next words.

"The lady was a Miss Lydia Stone," the lawyer went on. "I was only a lad at the time, and scarcely knew her at all, but I remember very well how lovely she was. She and Mr. Hallam quarreled a week before the appointed wedding day, I believe. I don't know the details, of course — no one did, although the village buzzed with gossip. At any rate, the wedding did not take place, and Mr. Hallam closed his great new house and went abroad. When he returned more than a year later — from Egypt, I understand — he found the beautiful Lydia had married another. Shortly afterward she went to California to live, and died there many years ago."

"I suppose it was on that trip that Great-Uncle Peter's curious passion for Egyptian antiques began?" Mr. Enfield suggested.

The lawyer nodded. "Up to that time he

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had been a business man with very little interest in such things," he replied. "He changed greatly in the years that followed. He sold his business, and dropped all of his old friends. He made several trips to Egypt, returning each time with new treasures: mummies, statues, pottery; heaven knows what! He welcomed no one to the house, in which he lived alone, except for the queer foreign servant he had picked up on his travels. But perhaps you knew of all this?"

Mr. Enfield shook his head. "I knew nothing whatever about him. My grandmother was his sister, but she died before I was born. He never wrote to my father, nor to me, and I was thunderstruck when your letter came, saying that he had willed his house to me."

"Well, he was queer," the lawyer repeated. "He had me trace you at the time he made his will. I suggested that he might like to have you visit him, as you were his last surviving relative. But he answered testily that kinsfolk were a bore, and he wanted nothing of them. Fact is, I think he didn't know what to do with the house. The University, which accepted his Egyptian collection, wouldn't have had any use

for it. Well, here it is." He broke off.
"What do you think of it?"

"My gracious, it's a *mansion!*!" Nancy gasped, in such awe-struck tones that even Mr. Charlton smiled a little.

The car labored up a drive of weed-grown gravel, between shaggy shrubs and knee-high grass. The old house was of wood; its paint so stained and blistered that one could scarcely guess it had once been white. Its cupola had settled a little to one side; the deep veranda sagged, and the shutters drooped forlornly on broken hinges.

A sad old house, Bernice thought, as they left the car and waited while Mr. Charlton fitted the key to the front door. A house that had never really been lived in. It had been new once, proud and shining, ready to shelter happy human hearts. Now it was old and shabby and sad, for never through all the years had love come to turn it into a home. "But maybe it isn't too late!" she thought, and laid a gentle hand on the cracked porch-railing. "Cheer up, old house — *we're* going to be happy here!"

As the door swung open, a chill musty breath came from the dim hall. Mr. Charlton led the

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way at once to a room on the right. It was furnished comfortably enough with deep leather chairs, and lined with rows of soberly bound books.

“Mr. Hallam used this library as his study and general living-room,” the lawyer explained. “There are twenty rooms in the house, but he occupied only two, this one and the bedroom above. He had his meals served here. The other rooms, with the exception of the kitchen and the attic bedroom where his servant slept, are just as the decorators left them. I understand that they are handsomely furnished, although I have never entered one of them until yesterday, when I had the bedroom adjoining my late client’s put in order for the young ladies here. Later, of course, you can choose which rooms you wish to use. Now, in the matter of a housekeeper, I can recommend a very competent woman —”

“Oh, *no!*” Bernice spoke abruptly, then stopped, confused.

“Bernice is the housekeeper,” Daddy interposed, smiling. “The elder sister in a motherless household has great responsibilities, Mr. Charlton, and Bernice has shouldered hers mag-

nificantly. For several years now she has managed our little flat, and kept on the honor roll at school as well. Nancy helps, of course, and I assure you that they are most efficient house-keepers."

"Very good, then," the lawyer answered, and Nancy thought, "I do believe he's beginning to approve of us!"

"If you'll come this way, Miss Bernice," he continued, "I'll show you the kitchen. I ordered some provisions — enough for to-night and for to-morrow's breakfast. I can send you a woman whenever you want her for laundry work, and for heavy cleaning. If you follow Mr. Hallam's example and restrict yourselves to a few rooms, I see no reason why you should not get along very comfortably without other outside help."

After the lawyer's departure, the Enfields supped informally in the great shadowy old kitchen, where Bernice was relieved to find that besides an immense coal range there was a small modern oil stove. Frizzled bacon and scrambled eggs, brown buttered toast, and a big bowl of fresh peaches were dispatched with the appetite travel gives. By the time Nancy had dried

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the last dish, twilight was creeping across the lawn.

Their father, who had gone back to the library, called to Bernice to see if there were candles in the kitchen. "Mr. Charlton said he had ordered the electricity turned on, but evidently they didn't get around to it," he remarked.

After much search she found half a dozen stubby tallow candles in a drawer. "These will do to go to bed by, anyway," she yawned. "And if you two are as tired as I am, that's all you'll need."

"It's been a long day," Daddy agreed. "I guess bed is the best place for us." He lighted a candle for each, and led the way upstairs.

The candlelight made fantastic shadows on the dark staircase, and the girls were glad to keep very close behind the tall figure of their father. When they reached the second floor landing, they were perplexed by three corridors branching in different directions. They chose the right-hand one, and after passing two locked doors came to that of the room directly over the library. This door opened at a touch, revealing a big chamber, furnished in heavily

carved mahogany. The windows were open, and the bed was freshly made. "This was Great-Uncle Peter's room, of course," Bernice observed. "And it shall be yours, Daddy, for to-night, anyhow. Let's see if the one next door is open."

It was. The room was smaller, but it contained a deep cushioned window-seat that enchanted Nancy. The girls were too tired and sleepy, however, to give much thought to their surroundings. They had brought up their smaller bags, and were quickly in their pajamas, cuddled between yellowed linen sheets. "To-morrow we'll explore," they promised each other happily, and were asleep almost before the words were uttered.

CHAPTER II

EXPLORATIONS AND DISCOVERIES

Breakfast was scarcely over when Nancy was on her feet, flourishing the big bunch of keys Mr. Charlton had left on the library table.

“Do come, Daddy,” she urged. “I can’t wait another minute to look into all those locked rooms. It’s the most mysterious, fascinating — oh, Sis, *don’t* say we must do the dishes first! If I have to wait any longer, I’ll just explode.”

Bernice glanced questioningly at Daddy, who pushed back his chair. “The dishes will keep, for once. Don’t ever throw it up to me that I encouraged such practices, though. Shall we begin with the nearest door?”

Bernice shook her head. “I’ve already explored the doors in the kitchen here,” she answered. “Besides the one from the passage where we came in, there’s the back door to the porch, a pantry, and a little room which must have been planned for the servants’ dining-room. I looked into it before breakfast. It’s

bright and sunny, with plain white table and chairs. I thought it would make a nice dining-room for us, because the real one is so big and so far away."

"All right, then, we'll leave that to you," Daddy replied. "Let's try these doors in the passage."

The keys all bore cardboard labels, lettered in faded violet ink. Hastily they ran over them. "Front Parlor," "Library," "Back Parlor," "Dining-Room," "Smoking-Room."

One after the other they threw open the doors of the ground-floor rooms. When the tour was completed, they turned into the library and sank wearily into the leather chairs. At the deep dismay on both girls' faces Daddy suddenly laughed outright.

"Pretty terrible, isn't it? Yet I give you my word that all that jigsaw golden oak and crinkly red plush was the last word in interior decorating when Uncle furnished his house. About the late Rutherford B. Hayes period, I should call it."

"But Daddy, it's frightful!" Bernice, keenly sensitive to beauty, could scarcely believe what she had seen. "The carpets, with

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glaring red and purple roses bigger than cabbages — and the chocolate-colored wall-paper — and the hand-painted china cupids! Didn't Great-Uncle Peter have any taste at all? ”

“ Well, as a matter of fact, I don't believe he did have a great deal. I should say that he turned the place over to the local furniture dealer, with instructions to give him the very best and spare no expense. He was a self-made man, you know, and might have been afraid to trust his own judgment, especially as Mr. Charlton tells us he was preparing the house for his promised bride.”

“ I'd like to know more about that bride,” Nancy put in. “ I think she got a glimpse of the front parlor, and just *ran*.”

“ And who could blame her? ” Daddy laughed. “ I'm a little disappointed about this furniture business,” he went on more seriously. “ I had hoped that we might realize some ready cash by selling most of it. It cost a lot, one can see that, but I doubt if any dealer would take it off our hands.”

“ I should think not! ” Bernice agreed. “ You couldn't call it antique, and nobody could

possibly want it for itself. I'm disappointed, too, Daddy. We do need money, don't we?"

There was a hint of anxiety in her voice, and Daddy was quick to reassure her. "Oh, we'll get along all right. The savings account will see us through the summer if we're careful, and then if the book doesn't provide bread and butter I can always go back to the paper. You musn't worry, dear."

"I won't, then." Bernice smiled back, and got briskly to her feet. "Let's go on surveying our kingdom. Upstairs next."

The bedrooms were not quite so bad, and they were cheered by the discovery of a quaint round room in the base of the cupola which would be just the thing for Daddy's study. There was a small solid mahogany table the right height for typewriting, with some empty sectional bookcases and two willow rocking-chairs, upholstered in faded chintz. "We'll bring up a straight chair from the dining-room," the young housekeeper announced. "The bookcases will hold your books and papers, and all those windows will give you plenty of light. You'll be far enough from the rest of the house here so that you can't hear a sound, and there

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won't be a thing in the world to disturb you. Just wait till I get it all fixed up, Daddy — you'll love it."

"I'm sure of that," he agreed. "Well, let's see. We've come to the last key. 'Egyptian Room,' it's marked. That must be where Uncle kept his treasures."

The key was larger and heavier than the others on the ring, and Nancy shivered a little as her father held it up.

"I feel exactly like Mrs. Bluebeard," she confided. "I want to go in, and I don't want to go in. Will there be mummies, Dads? Real live ones?"

"And what a bright question *that* is!" exclaimed Bernice witheringly. "If there's anything deader in this world than a real mummy I can't think what it could be."

"Oh, well, you know what I mean. And you needn't be so superior; you know perfectly well the thought of that room sends cold chills down *your* back, too. When we used to go to the Field Museum, you'd hurry me through the mummy room every time. And those were *public* mummies — our own private personal ones would be a thousand times more fearsome.

Right in the house, almost next door to where you sleep! Why, if their ghosts took a notion to walk, they'd be simply bound to walk in on us. Maybe we ought not to disturb them. Maybe if we don't go in there and get them all stirred up, they won't know we're here, and then they won't come stretching withered hands at us in the dead of night, and —”

“ Nancy, darling, you mustn't —” Daddy began, but Bernice laughed.

“ Don't mind her, Daddy, she's doing it on purpose. Nancy isn't afraid of ghosts — she knows perfectly well there aren't any such things. It's just that she loves to get what she calls a thrill by letting her imagination run away with her. Why, if a mummy's ghost did come to her at dead of night she'd have a wonderful time plying him with questions, and she'd probably end up by enticing him to go down in the kitchen and make fudge with her. *I know her!*”

“ My gracious, you do take the joy out of life!” Nancy exclaimed aggrievedly. “ I haven't made fudge in the middle of the night for ages, and I don't see why you can't let me work up some nice goose-fleshy thrills over Uncle Peter's mummies.”

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“Well, as I’m trying to explain,” Daddy broke in, “Uncle Peter’s mummies are now reposing in the University Museum. Shortly after his death, over three months ago, Mr. Charlton had the collection packed and shipped to the University, as Uncle had directed in his will.”

Nancy’s face fell. “Then there’s nothing in the Bluebeard chamber, after all?”

“Hardly anything. Mr. Charlton tells me that Dr. Fellowes, of the University, visited Great-Uncle Peter at his request, when the will was drawn, and went over the collection with him. Dr. Fellowes selected the objects the University wished to possess — which of course included everything of value. Some of Uncle’s purchases, however, were not old enough or rare enough to be worth exhibiting, and those were left in the Egyptian Room. Uncle was not a scientist, you know, and bought to please himself.”

“Oh, I didn’t know he bought them!” Nancy exclaimed. “I thought he went and dug in the old tombs, and found royal mummies and precious jewels for himself.”

“Nothing so romantic,” Daddy laughed.

“ You can’t just go to Egypt and dig, you know. Only recognized archæologists are granted that privilege, and even they are closely restricted by the Egyptian government. Very few treasures are allowed to leave the country nowadays, and they must be bought and paid for.”

“ And Great-Uncle Peter wasn’t even a — an arch — whatever it is? ”

“ No, he was just an amateur, passionately interested in Egyptian things, but by no means an authority on them. You spoke of jewels just now. It is a curious thing, Mr. Charlton was telling me, that the collection contained no jewels or ornaments of any kind. It seems that Great-Uncle Peter had a violent dislike for them. He did buy mummies, however — I believe there were four included in the bequest to the University. Then there were a number of sarcophaghi, or coffins, a fine array of burial urns, some small statues, and a quantity of household pottery. That was about the extent of the collection. Shall we go now and see what is left of it? ”

Before the girls could reply there came a terrific peal at the front door bell. “ That must

be the electric-light man," Bernice exclaimed, jumping up. "Our trunks have to be ordered up from the station, too, and I shall have to do some marketing before I can get another meal. Don't you think —"

"Of course, the Egyptian Room can wait," Mr. Enfield agreed. "Like the dishes — we had quite forgotten them! I want to get my books unpacked as soon as the trunks come, too. Come along, chicken. We'll continue our hunt for thrills to-morrow."

"All right," Nancy answered. "If you're sure there aren't any mummies I can wait. Anyway," she added hopefully, "maybe their ghosts stayed behind. If I feel a shriveled hand plucking at my coverlet to-night I shall *know!*"

CHAPTER III

THE EGYPTIAN ROOM

It was not until late the following afternoon that the Enfields were ready to attack the last locked door. The girls had been busy all the morning getting their household in running order. They had decided to keep the bedrooms Mr. Charlton had chosen for them, and to use in addition the library as a living-room, the cupola room for Daddy's study, the small dining-room, and the kitchen.

"That really makes a six-room apartment, and we can handle it easily," Bernice declared. "The other rooms we'll just keep locked and not bother with."

Daddy's books were unpacked, and ranged on the shelves of the small bookcase. His type-writer occupied the table, drawn near the windows, with a great pile of fresh white manuscript paper beside it. Working hours, he had announced, would be from nine to four, daily except Sundays. "And woe betide the intruder

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who dares knock at my door during those hours!" he warned, putting on a heavy scowl.

"As if we'd *think* of disturbing you!" Nancy finished sharpening the last of a dozen pencils and laid it carefully on the clean blotting-paper. "There! And now, Dads, we're going to open the Bluebeard Chamber. Once you get buried in the Book, there'll be no dragging you out of this room. And I do think that, for a *first* visit, a strong man's presence is most important. Just in case, you know."

Mr. Enfield looked at his watch and jumped up. "Well, I couldn't really make a start this afternoon, I suppose, though the temptation is almost overpowering. Come along, then, and we'll get it over."

"Wait till I get Sis." Nancy went to the head of the stairs and called Bernice, who had just returned from a marketing trip and was arranging her purchases on the pantry shelves. She had been delighted to find that the cost of foodstuffs was far lower in this little country place than she had found it in Chicago, and the friendly interest of the storekeepers had made her feel that she was already at home in Rosemont.

She came running at Nancy's call, and the three of them followed the main upstairs corridor to the back of the house, where it ended at the door of the Egyptian Room. The room was very large, running the full width of the house. The windows, as the girls had seen from the back yard, were heavily barred with iron. Great-Uncle Peter had taken no chances with his treasures.

There was only one door, an unusually heavy one of stout oak, reinforced with copper bands. The old lock was stiff, and Mr. Enfield struggled for several minutes before it finally yielded. At last, with a tug, he threw the great door open. Nancy clutched her sister excitedly.

Inside, it was almost dark, and Mr. Enfield crossed to open the old-fashioned Venetian blinds which shaded long windows. As he thus admitted the slanting rays of the afternoon sun, a cloud of dust arose and set the two girls coughing. They advanced a little fearfully, clinging to each other. A curious odor hung in the close air; a hint of cloves and tar, and of some queer spice they could not name.

"Well, here we are," Daddy called from across the room, and his hearty voice sounded

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comfortingly loud and human. Laughing a little, Nancy ran to his side.

Bernice, her eyes blinded by the sudden light, followed more slowly. "You're frightened," her sister accused her, from the safe shelter of her father's shoulder.

"No, I'm not — at least, I don't think it's that," Bernice answered honestly. "I did feel queer, there in the doorway. That funny smell, and the strange shadows — for a minute I had the oddest feeling that we were entering a tomb. But that's silly!" She gave herself a little shake, and turned to look about her.

The center of the room was bare, except for small glass cases such as one sees in a museum. These stood on bases of dark wood, bringing them about waist-high. There were six such cases standing in pairs the length of the room. The walls were lined with larger cases, glass to the floor, and taller than a tall man. There were no chairs, nor was there furniture of any description. The dusty floor was uncarpeted, and the walls were papered in dull red.

Nancy, her fears forgotten, had already darted to the nearest case. It was lined with yellowed white satin, still bearing the marks

of vases or jars which had been removed. It was quite empty.

“Here’s something, Puss!” Bernice called from a tall case between two windows. “Come and look — I think it’s Ali Baba’s own jar.”

It was indeed as big as the great jars in which the Forty Thieves met their doom; a hideous thing in dull red pottery, with rude black figures and signs painted on every inch of the surface. “These are hieroglyphics, aren’t they, Daddy?” Bernice asked, rather proud of her knowledge.

Mr. Enfield nodded. “I know that much, but you musn’t expect me to translate them. Egyptology was no part of my education, I’m sorry to say. I wonder if the jar is real, or only an imitation? Probably the latter, since the University rejected it.”

“Well, I don’t think much of *that*,” Nancy put in disgustedly. “Oh, here are some pottery toys — most of them are broken, though. Come over here and tell me about them.”

“Listen, young woman,” her father answered severely, as he strolled toward the case she pointed out. “My specialty is modern politics, not Egyptian lore. And well you know it.

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This attempt to expose my ignorance — Hello, here's Ra, the sun-god, with the head of a hawk, and Hathor, the cow-goddess. Your 'toys' are small images of the Egyptian gods, Nancy. Now *please* don't embarrass me with further questions!"

"I knew you'd know," Nancy answered serenely. "Now go on and tell me all about them. Why would a goddess, who could surely look like anything she wanted to, choose to look like a cow?"

While Mr. Enfield struggled to recall such scraps of Egyptian mythology as he had read, Bernice wandered to the farther end of the room. Here a great stone coffin-lid, too tall for the glass cases, stood alone against the wall. It was carved all over with the curious signs which she knew had been the sacred writing of the Egyptian priests. She passed her fingers idly over the rough surface, trying to imagine the long-dead workman who had wrought with such pains. What was his name? What were his thoughts? Perhaps his daughter, an Egyptian girl of Bernice's own age, had played about the workshop; had pressed her slim brown fingers where Bernice's rested now.

With a little sigh, for there was something saddening in the thought, Bernice rejoined her father and sister. They had left the case of statuettes, and were examining a stone animal at the far end of the room. Like the coffin-lid, it did not occupy a glass case, but stood, or rather sat, on a block of stone mounted on a low wooden platform. The platform made a convenient seat, and Nancy had dropped down at the feet of the image.

“It’s certainly a cat,” she was remarking. “But they must have grown bigger in Egypt than they do here!”

The figure was indeed about the size of a full-grown leopard. It was carved in the position a cat so often takes; sitting up with fore-paws straight; ears erect and head cocked a little to one side. The great paws rested on what looked like a thick roll of paper, carved in stone.

“This is what I call a really splendid piece of work,” Mr. Enfield remarked as Bernice joined them. “Look at the line of the back, and the muscles of the shoulders! And the papyrus scroll he guards — see, it even reproduces the wax seal! I wonder if this fellow wasn’t placed

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before a strong-room, a place where precious documents were kept? It would be a warning to thieves that the king's treasures were well-guarded."

"I think he's a perfectly adorable kitty," Nancy announced. "He's the only thing I've seen here that any one could possibly want. Why do you suppose the University turned him down? I should think they'd just love to have him."

"I don't know," Mr. Enfield answered. "He may be only a copy, of course, but he looks like a genuine antique to me. I believe that carven cats were extremely plentiful among the Egyptian ruins, however, and perhaps the University already had all the specimens they cared for. What have you found, Bernice?"

She led them to the sarcophagus lid, and after that the three wandered about, examining the scattered contents of the cases. Many were entirely empty; the others contained only bits of pottery and broken pieces of inscribed stone. Nancy was thrilled to find in one of the wall cases a faded card reading, "The mummy of a lady called Hatseph, who lived about 1000

B. C." But Hatseph had left nothing behind her except the faint queer spicy smell.

The light was fading, and Bernice's mind was turning to the preparation of dinner. "I'll help you close the shutters, Daddy," she offered. "There's nothing else to see here."

Nancy had wandered back to the stone cat. "I shall call him Bubastis," she said. "I read a story once about a sacred cat called that — *he* was Egyptian, too. Are you sure he's ours, Dads? The University can't come back and take him away?"

"No, indeed," Daddy reassured her. "They had their choice, and the objects they rejected become part of the contents of the house, which was left to me. The University has no claim on anything in this room now; Mr. Charlton made that very plain."

"Well, I'm glad they left Bubastis," Nancy answered. "Isn't he quaint, Dad? I can't help feeling that if I just rubbed his poor battered head a bit, he'd arch his back and purr. Should you mind if I claim him for my very own?"

"Not a bit; take him and welcome!" Mr. Enfield answered. "Why, what is it, Bernice?"

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The older girl, who had been busily closing shutters, suddenly started back, clutching at her father's arm.

"That face, Daddy!" she whispered. "Looking in at me from the big elm out there! Oh, it was horrible — black, and fierce — Daddy, what *is* it?"

"Why, daughter!" Mr. Enfield was utterly taken aback. Nancy's imaginative thrills were one thing; to have his sensible elder daughter give way to fancies was another matter. Gently he pulled away from her clutching hands and hurried to the window. The branches of the great elm crowded close to the glass; the wind was rising, and he looked out into a sea of tossing green leaves. There was no face, nor any sign of a human being.

Mr. Enfield passed an arm around the waist of each daughter and turned them firmly toward the door. "This family has too much imagination for its own good," he laughed. "Nancy started it, you caught it, Bernice. Let's get out of this gloomy place before I begin seeing things, too!"

CHAPTER IV

THE GYPSIES

“I’m going to explore the back yard,” Nancy announced next morning. Breakfast was over, beds were made and dishes washed. Mr. Enfield had retired to his study, and the two girls were alone in the kitchen. “It’s just a tangle of grass and weeds, I know, but down at the far end I caught a glimpse of cosmos flowers from the bedroom window. I’m sure there are enough for a table bouquet, anyway, and there may be other flowers if I can get through the jungle. Coming along, Sis?”

“I don’t think so,” Bernice answered absently. “I want to go through the china closets this morning — I know I can find something prettier than this horrid thick stoneware we’re using now. You run along, dear. There’s nothing I need you for, and the sunshine will do you good.”

Nancy waited for no urging, and soon she was breaking a path through the tangled weeds

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which grew high behind the house. There had been a flower garden here once, but years of neglect had left little to show for it. She pushed on, however, and came at last to the low stone wall which marked the end of their property. The cosmos grew against this wall, and though it was early for them, quite a number were in flower. Nancy drank in their clean pink and lavender beauty in delight. The brittle stems snapped easily, and in a few minutes she had a lovely bouquet.

Deciding at last that she had enough, she tied them carefully with a wisp of grass and sat down on the wall for a breathing spell. The girls had been so busy inside the house since their arrival that there had been little time to notice their outdoor surroundings.

Hallam House had been built on the outskirts of the little town, surrounded by grass-grown prairie. From where Nancy sat, only one other house could be seen; a pink stucco bungalow which stood about the width of a city block to the left of Hallam House. It looked spick and span, and very charming, with its beautifully kept lawn and trim hedge.

As Nancy idly watched, a girl somewhat

taller than Bernice came out of the kitchen door, carrying a basket of newly-washed clothes. She wore a sleeveless pink smock, the exact color of the house, and her straight black hair was smartly bobbed in a fashion Nancy thought very becoming. She pushed back her own clustering golden curls and for the hundredth time wished that Sister and Daddy would let her have them cut. Of course, curls were nice, but nobody who didn't have them could possibly imagine the trouble they were! Bernice wore her soft brown hair short, and it had just the hint of a wave which made a fascinating frame for her face. She would never listen to Nancy's pleas for short hair, though. "When you have fairy-princess golden curls, you simply have to live up to them!" was the way she always settled the matter.

The Bungalow Girl was hanging her clothes on the line now, and whistling; a clear, merry little tune which made Nancy pucker her own lips in imitation. It was so babyish not to be able to whistle tunes! Nancy tried hard, but only a funny, toneless note would come, not in the least like the other girl's easy melody.

Nancy wondered what this neighbor girl's

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name was, and if she were as nice as she looked. Nancy had heard that in small towns every one knew everybody; that you didn't have to wait to be introduced, but just made friends with the people who lived near you. That did seem queer! So different from the city, where you might live in an apartment building for years and know no more of your neighbors than their names on the mail box. She wondered if it could be true, what she had heard of small-town customs. She hoped it was. She hoped she and Bernice would get to know this Bungalow Girl — and soon!

The girl finished her task and disappeared into the house. Nancy waited a bit, and then, as she did not come out again, she turned around to see what lay beyond the wall on which she had seated herself. In her surprise she exclaimed aloud, "Why, it's gypsies!"

The ground fell away into a little hollow below her, with a willow-fringed creek running through it. And among the willows there was certainly a gypsy camp. Lean horses grazed on the bank of the stream; there was a canvas-covered wagon and a dingy tent. Blue smoke curled from a fire on the ground, and Nancy

could see a fat brown baby rolling in the dust with a spotted dog. An old woman was stirring something in a pot on the fire, and a younger one was sitting on an upturned box, mending a tattered garment. A man slept in the sun, ragged hat over his face.

Nancy had heard and read of gypsies; she had seen plenty of imitation ones on stage and screen. But these were real! She turned her back to the house, swinging her feet over the wall, so that she could watch them.

Although it was only June, the day was growing very hot. Plainly the gypsies had little to do. The old woman presently left the fire and seated herself beside the younger one. Taking a pack of greasy cards from her pocket, she spread them out on the ground and bent over them.

Several minutes passed. Nancy grew a little drowsy with the heat, and a little impatient with the gypsies. Why didn't they do something? Dance, or sing, as they always did on the stage? This was dull; she might as well get back to the house before her flowers drooped.

She was getting ready to go when a man came out of the gypsy tent. He was so different from

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the others that she stopped to watch him. His feet were bare, as were those of the sleeping man, but instead of shabby rags he wore a well-pressed blue serge suit, with a clean white collar, and his black hair was smoothly brushed.

His appearance had a curious effect on the other gypsies. The two women sprang to their feet. The younger one hurried into the tent and came out carrying a camp chair, which she placed for him in the shade. The old woman quickly dipped a bowl into the pot, and brought it to him. The man who had slept roused himself and became very busy mending some harness which hung from the limb of a tree. Even the baby and the dog ceased their play and sat silent, watching the newcomer with solemn eyes. He accepted the attentions of the women with no sign of gratitude.

“Mercy, he must be their king!” Nancy murmured to herself. She could hear their voices, but they spoke in some strange tongue she could not understand. The tones, however, told her that they were addressing the second man with respect; almost with fear.

Nancy studied his face. He was a man of perhaps fifty or so, very dark, with little beady

black eyes. Not a nice face, she decided. He scowled at the women who were doing their best for his comfort, and he kicked savagely at the dog who came nosing at the bowl of soup on his knees. "I don't believe a gypsy's life is so romantic, after all," Nancy thought. "Not with a king like that, anyway! I just know he's as mean as he can be to all of them. I wonder why they don't get up a revolution? They must be fearful cowards."

Perhaps the man felt her intent stare. All at once he lifted his gaze and looked straight into her face. Only for a moment, but his eyes were so fierce that Nancy thought bewilderedly, "Why, he hates me!" Was he angry because she was staring? Flushing a little, Nancy slipped down from the wall on her own side.

She had dropped her flowers in her haste. Well, no scowling gypsy was going to frighten *her*! Sternly she resisted a wild desire to run, and run, and not to stop until she was safe inside Hallam House, with Daddy's strong arms around her. That was babyish, if you like! She had a perfect right to sit on her wall, hadn't she? She hadn't harmed any one; she'd only been looking, because a gypsy camp was a

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strange and interesting sight. She talked very severely to herself while she gathered up the scattered flowers.

A footstep on the hillside beyond the wall!

Nancy stood perfectly still, trying to tell herself that she had not really heard it.

“Good morning, little missy, and a blessing on your gold head.” The voice was a woman’s, and Nancy forced herself to turn around. The old woman from the camp stood on the other side of the wall, panting a little from her quick climb, but smiling coaxingly.

“What do you want?” Nancy asked sharply. Thank goodness, it was the woman, and not that fierce-looking man!

“Just to tell your fortune, Missy,” the old woman wheedled. “Give me your hand — no, I want no money. Just the little white hand, and I will tell you all the future holds.”

Her black eyes twinkled wickedly among a thousand wrinkles, and Nancy felt that there was nothing she wanted less than to have her fortune told by this ancient witch. But it seemed the quickest way to get rid of her, so reluctantly she put out her hand. The gypsy woman grasped it tight in her skinny ones.



“I WILL TELL YOU ALL THE FUTURE HOLDS.”

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She bent over Nancy's palm, crooning to herself in that strange tongue. Then she looked up, the smile gone from her face.

"Trouble and woe, trouble and woe," she chanted in a deep hollow voice. "You have come to an ill place, little Missy, where sorrow awaits you and yours. Only flight can save you! You must go, young maiden; go far and fast and do not linger! Those who love you must flee with you — heed now the gypsy's warning! Let not the sun go down upon you in this place, or you and those with you shall rue it forever! You must go, go — only flight can save you!"

Nancy stood as though spellbound, her wide, frightened eyes fixed upon the wrinkled face. She tried to speak, to order the woman to go away, but the words would not come. She could not even think, she could only wait helplessly for what was coming next.

Suddenly the gypsy dropped Nancy's hand, and her voice rose to a wild screech. "I am the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter! I see beyond the veil! Trouble and woe, and flight alone can save! To an evil place you have come, but it is not too late. Be warned, maiden, and

warn your loved ones! Sleep not another night beneath yon roof! Go, go, go — ”

“ Say, listen, Grandma, what’s the big idea? ” At the cool young voice Nancy stirred and sighed, as though waking from a horrid dream. It was the Bungalow Girl. She had come up quietly behind Nancy, and passed a strong arm around her shoulders. Nancy gave a little gulp, and buried her head in the pink smock.

The girl went on speaking to the gypsy. “ You know who I am, I guess — my dad’s the sheriff here. What do you mean by coming up here and annoying this young lady? Come on, speak up. What’s it all about? ”

“ So sorry, Missy.” The old woman’s voice was suddenly meek. “ I only told the little lady what her palm told me; I am not to blame if it frightened her.”

“ Don’t try to tell me that! ” the Bungalow Girl answered contemptuously. “ You were deliberately trying to frighten her — I heard you. Now why? ”

“ No, no, Missy, I would not do that! ” The old woman was positively cringing now, and Nancy lifted her head a little and began to wonder why she had found her so fearsome.

Why, she was just a poor old crazy thing who could surely have meant no harm!

The Bungalow Girl was looking thoughtfully across the wall, and down into the hollow where the camp stood. "I don't understand this at all. I wonder — is Ali mixed up in it? Did he send you up here?"

"No, no!" There was terror in the gypsy's husky tones. "Do not speak that name, Missy. It was I — I only am to blame. I swear it. I — It may be I misread the palm. I am old, and my eyes do not see the lines so plainly as once they did. I am but a poor ignorant gypsy, I meant no harm. See, I will read the hand again — perhaps I shall find a handsome husband for her, and much wealth — let me try —"

She reached for Nancy's hand again, but the girl shrank back. "Don't let her!" she whispered, and the new girl squeezed her hand.

"We don't care for any more, thanks," she answered coldly. "You admit that there was no truth in what you just told her, then? It was simply some silly rigmarole you made up, wasn't it?"

"A mistake — it was all a mistake," the fortune-teller mumbled. "You will not set the

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officers upon us, and drive us away from the hollow? I am sorry I frightened the golden child, see, on my knees I beg her to forgive me. I alone am to blame — it was a mistake —”

“ Oh, all right, all right.” The Bungalow Girl silenced her. “ You can go, but don’t come up here again — you hear me. And tell Ali he’s not to come skulking around Hallam House, either. My father has warned him once, and now I’m warning you. Now go, before I change my mind! ”

The old woman, muttering to herself, moved quickly off down the hillside, and the strange girl patted Nancy’s shoulder. “ There, now, she’s gone. You heard her admit that there was no truth in all that wild talk, didn’t you? Just a lot of silly stuff she made up to frighten you — heaven knows why! Look up, now, and smile. I’m Natalie Clarke, your nearest neighbor, and I was coming to call on you, anyway, if that old witch hadn’t brought me over this morning. I saw her from our yard, and I thought I’d better come over and take a hand, because you’re probably not as used to dealing with gypsies as I am.”

“ I guess I’m not used to it at all.” Nancy

gave a shaky little laugh. " You won't believe me, but I wasn't as scared as I looked. I was more petrified with astonishment than anything else. She came upon me so suddenly, and I didn't know what to make of it all. Shall we get back to the house? Of course, I *was* scared, some," she added honestly, as they pushed through the thick weeds. " And you weren't the least little bit. I do think you must be the bravest girl in the whole world!"

Natalie laughed. " I'm not, though — I'm afraid of heaps of things. But of course I'm used to gypsies and tramps, being the sheriff's daughter. They're a cowardly lot, really, when you stand up to them. But let's forget it, sha'n't we? I'm so glad you and your sister have come. There are no girls in this neighborhood at all, and I've been so lonely. I do hope we're going to be friends."

" I just know we are! " Nancy answered fervently.

CHAPTER V

THE NEW FRIEND

Natalie was easily persuaded to stay for luncheon, and as Daddy had asked for a tray in his study, the three girls ate alone on the wistaria-covered back porch. There was a small table there, which Bernice spread with a clean blue-and-white cloth. "I've wanted to eat outdoors all my life," she confided to the visitor. "And this is the very first chance we've ever had. You're sure you don't mind?"

"I love it," Natalie answered promptly. "And I love these nut sandwiches, and the salad, and the scrumptious little butter cookies! How in the world did you learn to cook and keep house so perfectly? I help Mother around home, of course, but I could never take hold and run the whole place myself."

"Well, you see, I had to," Bernice answered. "Our mother died when Nancy was a little thing, and there was no one but me to take her place."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Natalie answered softly. "I didn't know — I shouldn't have asked prying questions like that. Will I ever learn to keep my mouth shut!"

"But it's quite all right," Bernice replied. "We talk about Little Mumsey often — she'd hate it if we made a 'painful subject' of her. She was so gay and happy — we miss her, of course," Bernice's voice quivered a little, but she went on bravely. "But we know that she's just gone away, and that it isn't forever. And we won't let ourselves be sad when we think of her, because we know that would make her sad, too, where — where she is."

"And you called *me* brave!" Natalie murmured to Nancy, blinking very hard to show she was not crying.

For a moment no one spoke, and in the silence the new friendship seemed to take root and grow and blossom. "She *understands!*" Bernice's eyes said to Nancy's. And Natalie's heart grew warm with the thought, "The brave darlings! They shall share *my* mother!"

Then Natalie spoke, quite practically. "I'm dying to know all about you two. You came from the city, didn't you? Daddy heard down-

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town that Hallam House had been left to old Mr. Hallam's grand-nephew, and we were all so surprised; we didn't know he had a relative in the world."

"Oh, did you know Great-Uncle Peter?" Nancy interrupted.

Natalie shook her head. "No one knew him, really. He never went out, and hardly any one ever came to see him. Once in a while the expressman would bring a huge packing-case, and he'd come out and fuss about getting it in — he was terribly cranky, and seemed afraid the man would break something. It would be some of his Egyptian specimens, I guess. And sometimes one of the professors at the University would spend a night with him. But mostly he lived alone with Ali, his Arab servant. Ali was queer, too. I often saw him working in the yard, or going to the store, but he never spoke to me, nor even looked up. He always gave me the creeps, somehow. He had a horrid mean, sullen face."

"What became of him when Great-Uncle Peter died?" Bernice asked curiously.

"Why, didn't you know? He went to live with the gypsy band in the hollow. I suppose

they must be some sort of relations — they turned up the day after the funeral, and have been camped there ever since. Daddy says some of the farmers are complaining that they steal chickens and fruit — if they don't move on pretty soon, he's going to order them away. I'm going to tell him to-night about how the old woman frightened you, Nancy."

"Oh, don't get her into trouble," Nancy answered quickly. "I was silly to make such a fuss about it — she didn't mean any harm, poor old thing."

"What *are* you talking about?" Bernice demanded, and Nancy flushed. "I didn't mean to tell you, Sis — it wasn't anything, really. I'm ashamed now for having been such a 'fraidy-cat. But you should have seen how brave Natalie was!"

She launched into an account of the adventure, half-afraid her elder sister would scold, yet relieved to get it off her mind. Bernice's arm tightened about her precious little sister as she listened, and her eyes glowed as Nancy related how Natalie had come to her defence.

"Oh, it wasn't anything at all," Natalie repeated for the dozenth time. "What puzzles

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me, though," she went on thoughtfully, "is why she did it? Painted that gloomy picture, I mean. I've had my fortune told by gypsies lots of times, just for fun, and they always promise you a rich husband and a beautiful home. Trying to give you your money's worth, I guess. That's another queer thing; she didn't want any money. I never heard of one of them offering to tell fortunes for nothing before. Just what was it she said, Nancy?"

As well as she could Nancy repeated the soothsayer's words. " Sounds to me like an attempt to frighten us away from here," Bernice commented thoughtfully.

" Exactly what I thought!" Natalie agreed. " And do you know, I looked down the hill while we were talking to her, and saw Ali peering up as if he were very much interested. It struck me that he had something to do with it, so I asked her if Ali had sent her. The poor old thing looked simply paralyzed when I mentioned him! I just know he put her up to it."

" But why?" Bernice questioned. " What difference can it possibly make to him where we live?"

" Was Ali the dressed-up gypsy?" Nancy

asked suddenly. "Because he saw me — before she came up, I mean. And he looked at me — oh, it was the most dreadful look! That was what frightened me, really, more than the things she said. His eyes made my blood run cold."

"Now, kitten," Bernice began soothingly, but Nancy had remembered something. "That face — the one you saw looking in at the Egyptian Room window yesterday! You said it looked fierce — and *you* were frightened, too. Could that have been Ali?"

"I don't know — I thought I must have imagined —" Bernice began uncertainly. "I believe it was," she went on. "I'd lots rather know that it was a prowling gypsy than — than —"

"Than an outraged mummy ghost!" Nancy said solemnly, and the two elder girls were swept into a gale of sudden laughter.

"Oh, Nancy, you're priceless!" Natalie exclaimed. "And of course it was Ali, both times," she added. "What he's driving at we don't know, but he seems bent on annoying you people for some reason of his own. Maybe he had some grudge against old Mr. Hallam, or

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maybe it's just aimless mischief. Anyway, if he gets troublesome we can just have Father move him on. Let's forget him and talk about something pleasanter. Can't you both come over to my house this afternoon? I want you to know my mother, and I've got the cunningest baby brother, and a cat with four new kittens. And I *think* we might make peach ice cream."

CHAPTER VI

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

It had been a busy day, and Bernice was asleep almost as soon as the two girls settled in bed. But Nancy, though her eyes felt heavy, was wide awake in her mind. She lay quietly, so as not to disturb her sister, and went over the whole day again.

It had been lovely, meeting Natalie! The two sisters had had few girl friends in the city; it was a delightful new experience, to know another girl who liked the same books they did, who laughed at the same jokes, and who understood things without being told. Although Natalie was past sixteen, three months older than Bernice, she was not a bit condescending to fourteen-year-old Nancy. There had been girls in Chicago who wanted to be chums with Bernice, but who felt that Nancy was too young to bother with. Nancy smiled to herself in the darkness at the way Bernice had drawn away from them when she found that out. The two

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sisters were everything in the world to each other, and a friend to one must be a friend to both. Natalie had understood that, right away. Natalie was a darling!

Her mother was sweet, too. She hadn't minded a bit when they dragged out the ice-cream freezer and made peach ice cream, with sun-ripened fruit from Natalie's very own tree. And hadn't it been good!

The baby brother was adorable. Pudge, they called him. He had not been walking very long, and sometimes his fat little legs gave way under him, and he sat down with a thud. But he never cried at all; just got up with his cheerful grin and tried it again. Nancy thought it must be nice to have a baby brother like Pudge. Probably she could play with him a lot, though; it would be almost the same as having one of her own. And she was going to have a kitten. Natalie's mother had said the black-and-white one could be hers, and she could bring it to Hallam House as soon as it was old enough to leave the mother cat.

Sleep was coming nearer now. Nancy cuddled closer into her pillow and on closed eyelids saw a dim picture of herself, and Pudge and the

black-and-white kitten. She was drifting off to dreamland, when suddenly into the picture came a face; the ugly, sullen face of the dressed-up gypsy. O heavens, now the pleasant dream-picture was gone, and she was broad awake again!

She stirred restlessly. What had been the matter with her this morning? Natalie must have thought her the greatest coward in the world. No, she wouldn't think that — Natalie understood. But she did wish she had gathered her wits about her and told the old woman to be off, instead of standing there like a helpless baby to be rescued.

As she had told Natalie, the old woman's dark prophecies had frightened her a little, but it was surprise rather than fear that stayed her tongue in the fortune-teller's presence. Her real fright had come earlier, when she caught that glimpse of Ali's hate-filled face, looking up at her. She remembered how she had wanted to run, then, and felt glad now that she had made herself stay and gather up her flowers. That proved that she wasn't truly a coward, didn't it?

What did Ali's look mean? Had he really

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sent the old woman up there to scare her, to make her believe that she and her "loved ones" were in danger if they did not go away from Hallam House? But why — why?

It seemed certain, now, that Ali had been prowling about the grounds, watching them from the tree while they explored the Egyptian Room. Daddy had been very sure Bernice had only imagined the face in the tree, and they had said nothing to him about the encounter with the gypsies. Daddy was deep in his book, and was not to be worried about anything. But Natalie's father had come home in time for his portion of the ice cream, and the big red-faced sheriff had been deeply interested in the girls' story.

"There's something mighty funny about that fellow," he had said. "He's been hanging around with those gypsies ever since Mr. Hallam's death. They don't usually stay camped in one place so long, either. Looks like they were waiting for something. But what? There's another thing —"

He had broken off then, and would say no more, except that the girls were to tell him if the gypsies annoyed them again. And he had

warned them to be very careful to lock the old house securely at night. It was Natalie who told them, later, that her father had seen Ali skulking about the place before they came. "He didn't want to scare you," she explained. "But several evenings, after dark, we could see some one moving around the garden and porch. Once Father went over, and found Ali sitting on the veranda rail, smoking his pipe. He said the place seemed like home to him, after living there so long, and he wasn't doing any harm. But Father warned him he was trespassing, and to keep away in future. So you see it wasn't really anything."

Nancy, lying in the darkness now and thinking it all over, was not quite so sure that the whole matter of Ali "wasn't really anything." She wished she could go to sleep and forget it.

Funny, the sounds in an old house at night! Though after the city clamor the air was so still one could almost feel the quiet, there were odd little creakings and rustlings Nancy had never heard in her city home. Mice, perhaps? It must be mice. When they got the black-and-white kitten —

The old stairs squeaked when one walked on

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them. It seemed quite natural in daylight, when Nancy went up and down, to hear that funny little squeak under her feet. But — why should they squeak now? Daddy had gone to his room long ago, Bernice was sleeping soundly beside her. The doors were locked, the windows barred; there were only the three of them in the house. Why should the old stairs squeak now?

Nancy lay so still she ached from the strain, and held her breath to hear better. The upstairs corridors were heavily carpeted and the boards were firm; it would be impossible to hear a footfall if — if there were one to hear. She could no longer hear the squeaks from the staircase. Probably she had not heard them at all. Her imagination again!

The old clock on the landing struck; a long-drawn-out, doleful twelve. Good heavens! Twelve o'clock, and she had not been asleep! What would Sister say? Resolutely Nancy sat up and thumped her pillow into smoothness. Enough of this silly lying in the dark, frightening oneself with imaginary sounds. She would —

What was that? Her head had scarcely

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touched the pillow when it came — a dull, muffled thud from the back of the house. No imagination, this time, either, for Bernice stirred and groped for Nancy's hand. "What in the world are you doing?" she demanded sleepily.

Nancy pressed close to her, her teeth chattering in sudden chill. "Oh, Sis, wake up! I can't sleep, and I'm so frightened! There's something — some one — oh, I don't *like* this house!"

"Stop it!" The elder sister, wide awake now, held Nancy firmly in her arms. "What have you been up to? What did you drop that made that crash? Have you been downstairs making fudge again?"

"Mercy, no! Do you think I'd go wandering around *this* house at dead of night? Fond of fudge, I may be, and I do think you're mean not to let me make it oftener — but my goodness, I guess I've got a little sense! And if you knew what I've been through, lying here listening to — to mummy ghosts climbing the stairs — and then you go and accuse me — oh, why did we ever come to this horrible place? The gypsy woman warned me, she *said* we would

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rue it! And I am — I'm just rueing it like everything this very minute!"

Bernice was out of bed now, and snapping on the light. "Let me look at you, and see if this is 'thrills' or the real thing. Um — well, about half and half, I should say. Something did frighten you, and you're piling on the mummy ghosts and the gypsy's warning for good measure. Come on, now, tell Sister all about it."

She left the light on, and hopped back into bed. Nancy, wrapped in the counterpane, began to feel warm and cozy again. After all, what was there to tell? She had fancied she heard the stair squeaking; she had certainly heard the thud which had awakened Bernice. All the rest of her troubled thoughts had been — just thoughts. They had seemed real enough in the darkness, but under the bright electric light and her sister's waiting eyes they melted away into nothing.

Nancy's native good sense asserted itself. "I guess it was just 'thrills,' after all," she admitted frankly. "I got to worrying, when I couldn't sleep — thinking about the gypsy woman, and Ali, and wondering what he was

up to. Nothing happened, really, except that noise. You heard it too. What *could* it have been?"

"I can't imagine." Bernice suppressed a yawn. "Probably the wind banging a shutter on the outside of the house, or — or something. Do we get some sleep to-night, or don't we? I *wish* you'd stage these dramatic scenes in the daytime, darling! I'm simply dead for sleep."

"Oh, you're so practical!" Nancy crawled to the foot of the bed and put out the light. "I like you to be that way, though," she confided, as her head found the pillow. "One vivid imagination in the family is enough, say I. I *am* sleepy, now. Do you know it's after twelve? Isn't Pudge cunning? I'm almost sure that sound came from the Egyptian Room. Sis, did you hear me? I said —"

"The little Maltese was sweet, but I liked the black-and-white one best," Bernice answered dreamily.

"Me, too. I'm going to teach him tricks —" The old clock struck again, but no one heard it, for Hallam House was wrapped in slumber.

CHAPTER VII

THE STRANGE FOOTPRINT

“Well, I’m all for exploring the Egyptian Room. Nancy’s sure your mysterious crash came from there, and we can at least see if anything’s been disturbed. Besides, I’m dying of curiosity to see the place,” Natalie ended frankly.

It was the afternoon of the next day. Natalie, upon her arrival after lunch, had listened with eager interest to the story of the midnight alarm. The sisters, in the sober light of day, had agreed that it was not important enough to bother Daddy with, but the new chum provided an ideal listener. After all, it *had* been mysterious, that muffled crash in the sleeping house. And in broad daylight Nancy was recovering some of her delight in mystery, which had been strangely lacking last night.

“All right, let’s,” Bernice agreed. “We won’t need the key — Daddy didn’t lock it up again after we were in there. There’s nothing worth stealing, you know. Come along.”

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From the threshold, the big room seemed just as they had left it after their first and only visit. It was not until they had opened the blinds that Bernice made her discovery. The stone sarcophagus lid, which she had last seen standing against the wall, was now lying flat on the dusty floor.

“Here was our crash, Nancy,” she exclaimed. “No wonder we could hear it in the front bedroom — this thing must weigh hundreds of pounds.”

The other two girls advanced and studied the fallen slab. “Did it just fall over by itself?” Natalie asked doubtfully.

“It must have,” Bernice answered. “When we were here last it was tilted against the wall, and now — well, you see.”

“But I *don’t* see.” Natalie puckered her brows over the problem. “The windows are closed, so we can’t blame the wind. If it had been overbalanced, it would have fallen long ago, it seems to me. I don’t see how it could have toppled over suddenly, like that, in the middle of the night, unless something touched it. Do you?”

“Girls, look!” Nancy was pointing to the

floor in the corner near which the coffin lid lay, and her voice had a ring of excitement which startled the older girls. "Look, there in the dust!"

"Shades of Robinson Crusoe!" breathed Natalie. "It's a man's footprint! And a bare foot, at that!"

The girls stared at each other, and then their eyes sought the floor again. There could be no doubt of it. The room had been so long neglected that the dust was deep, and clearly outlined in it was the perfect print of a large bare foot.

"Your father —" began Natalie, but the sisters laughed. "Daddy never goes barefoot, even to the bathroom," Bernice explained. "He's quite fussy about his slippers — he must have a dozen pairs. And of course he hasn't been in here since he came with us. Let's see. The men from the Museum came in here to pack Uncle Peter's collection, didn't they? "

"That was nearly three months ago — I saw them when they came," Natalie answered promptly. "And this print is fresh, any one can see that. Look at the footprints you've just made, and then — over there, Bernice, that

must be yours from the other day. See how the dust has already sifted in and dimmed it? This bare print was made since you opened the room this week; I'm sure of that."

"Here are some more of them," Nancy announced. "They're harder to see where they cross ours, but — why, he's left this case open!"

The other girls hurried to her side. The case, one of the pairs in the middle of the floor, had surely been tampered with. Its satin lining had been rudely ripped loose from the base; some little terra cotta figures inside were jumbled together. The sliding glass door was half open. This was odd, because the cases, while not locked, were fastened with bolts concealed in such a way that a stranger would hardly know how to find them.

Natalie glanced at the trail of bare footprints.

"He came in at the door, and straight to this case here," she decided. "He searched it, and not finding what he was looking for, started for the wall case next to the coffin lid. Someway he brushed against the lid, knocking it down. Then he turned and ran — see, the steps lead straight back to the door again. I suppose he was afraid some one would come when they

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heard the crash, and made his escape as quickly as possible."

Bernice had been scanning the floor toward the other end of the room. "I think there have been bare footprints here, too," she said perplexedly. "But I'm not sure — they're so blurred that they might be Daddy's from the other day. They're bigger, though, like the bare ones. Only they're not fresh like these."

"Maybe last night wasn't his first visit," Natalie suggested, and Nancy gave a delighted little shudder.

"Mummies have bare feet, haven't they? Oh, just suppose it was a mummy ghost, and he walks here every night! Ooh, just suppose that!"

"Well, if he walks here every night, he ought to know enough not to knock things around," Natalie laughed. "No, I'm afraid a ghost won't account for these footprints. They were made by a living man, a barefooted man, and he was searching for something."

"But searching for what?" Bernice demanded. "There's nothing here. Great-Uncle Peter willed his collection to the University Museum, and they came and took away

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everything that was worth having. What could any one hope to find here?"

"Well, that's only one mystery," Nancy put in. "There are heaps of others. Who *is* Baretoes? How did he get in? What — Oh, it makes my head swim!"

"Mine, too," Natalie agreed. "I'm only certain of one thing — Baretoes, as you call him, believed that there was something worth having in this room, or he wouldn't have taken such chances to come here and search for it."

"Well, I don't believe he found it," Nancy said eagerly. "It was dark — he wouldn't have dared turn on the lights, for fear of being seen from outside. So he'd have had to use a flashlight, and when that thing crashed he was afraid to stay any longer. I just know he didn't find it! Don't you suppose, if *we* looked very hard, we could find it, whatever it is? Maybe that would solve the whole mystery!"

"You do have ideas, small one!" Natalie said admiringly. "Come on, let's do it."

The search was a long and tiring one. It was especially difficult because they did not know in the least what they were searching for. But they poked into every nook and cranny, turning

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the vases upside down to make sure they held nothing; lifting the cases' satin linings as Bare-toes had done, to make sure they concealed only bare boards. No discovery of any sort rewarded their efforts.

CHAPTER VIII

“SPEAK, BUBASTIS!”

Exhausted, with disordered hair and grimy hands, Nancy sank down on the low platform which held the stone cat she called Bubastis. The two older girls had come to the last possible hiding-place, the great red Ali Baba jar. Slowly and carefully they lifted it from the wall case and began turning it over on its side, for it was too tall to reach into when it stood erect.

Nancy twisted about to see the carven cat face above her. The stone eyes were gazing straight ahead, wise and serene. “*You know!*” Nancy addressed the figure. “You sit here, so quiet and calm, and all the time you know everything. Who Baretoes is, what he was looking for — and where he might have found it! Can’t you talk, Bubastis? Just this once? We’ll never tell that you forgot your dignity and spoke to ordinary humans. You look wise enough to know all the secrets in the world. And we’re only asking you for one — just one,

Bubastis! Won't you please, please, tell us the secret of Hallam House?"

The stone cat continued to look straight ahead, and his majestic face did not quiver. "Oh, well, if you're going to be mean about it—" Nancy began, and broke off suddenly. An idea had come to her, an idea so utterly absurd that she laughed at herself, even as she wondered —

"Nothing but dust!" Bernice exclaimed disgustedly, her arm plunged to the shoulder in the Ali Baba jar. She felt carefully all around the inside, however, before she withdrew her arm and with Natalie's assistance set the jar upon its base again and closed the glass door. "I saved it for the last, too, because it looked such a wonderful hiding-place. Oh, well — what *are* you doing, kitten?"

Nancy had risen, and, with her arms about the stone cat's neck, was trying to bring her eyes to the level of his. "Now show me, Bubastis," she murmured coaxingly, but with a little giggle at her own foolishness. "Show me exactly what it is you see. Come on, nice kitty! You're looking at it so earnestly — it *must* be the secret! Please let Nancy look, too!"

“Well, of all the crazy notions —” Bernice began, but Nancy interrupted her. “That wall case over there, Sis — no, bother, it’s the next one! No, it isn’t either. O dear, if I could only get my head —”

Bernice stared, but Natalie came to Nancy’s side with quick interest. “You’re trying to see what the cat is looking at — is that it?”

Nancy nodded, a little shamefacedly. “He *knows*, Bubastis does. And he’s staring so hard — and of course there’s no other way he could tell us — if only my head didn’t get in the way I could see exactly what he means me to!”

“Here, then, let me fix you.” Good-naturedly Natalie knelt in the dust before the stone cat, with no regard whatever for her stocking knees. “Put your head right in front of his,” she directed. “A little lower — that’s it. Now, let me see.”

Still on her knees, she hunched herself to the side and surveyed the two profiles, Nancy’s and the cat’s. “Come and see what you think, Bernice,” she called, and the older sister, interested in spite of herself, came and knelt on the other side.

The smaller girl held perfectly still and let

them twist her head as they would. The crouching position she had to take was uncomfortable, but she did not even feel it, for her excitement was growing every minute.

With her hands Natalie tilted Nancy's chin a little higher, and then pronounced the position perfect. "Now — whatever you see straight in front of you is what the cat is looking at. What is it, Nancy?"

"That wall case in the farthest corner, where those bowls and cups are," Nancy replied instantly.

Bernice hurried to the case, while Nancy continued to stare straight ahead, her eyes fixed upon the very point at which the cat had gazed so unwinkingly. The corner was dusky, and Nancy could scarcely make out the objects which the case held. Bernice began touching them, one by one.

"Higher — the next shelf!" Nancy called.

This case was one of the few in the room that were fairly well filled. Its four shelves held an assortment of rudely shaped dishes; some highly glazed in brilliant colors; others of plain rough clay. The colored ones were ornamented with designs probably meant for fruits

or flowers; most of the plainer ones were covered with Egyptian writing. Bernice had searched this case thoroughly a few minutes before, and had found nothing of interest.

In obedience to Nancy's directions, she touched the pottery on the third shelf. Her hand was moving slowly from right to left when Nancy suddenly called, “Stop! That's it! Whatever your hand is on now — that's exactly where Bubastis was looking. Bring it here, Sis, quick!”

With a sigh of relief, she relaxed to a sitting position beside Natalie, who was cross-legged on the floor. Bernice came slowly forward out of the shadows, and they reached eagerly for the small object she carried in her hand.

CHAPTER IX

THE YELLOW CUP

It was a cup of yellow clay, somewhat smaller than an ordinary teacup. There was no handle, and the modelling reminded Bernice of her own efforts in kindergarten. The rim was not a perfect circle, and one side bulged lumpyly, but it stood solidly enough when they set it on the floor. No one could call it pretty, but it was a homely, sturdy little thing, speaking rather of kitchens and baby's milk than of temples and royal burials.

“I do think your old cat might at least have given you one with decorations!” Bernice voiced the disappointment that all three girls could not help feeling. It was silly, of course, to think that the stare of the stone cat had really *meant* anything; after all, it had just been one of Nancy's “notions.” But it had seemed so real, while they were at it — even practical Bernice had felt as though they were on the verge of solving the mystery. And this was

all it had led to; a little cup of common yellow clay which they had seen before. It was ridiculous to think that Baretoes had risked arrest for housebreaking to make his frantic search — for *this*!

“Well, it has carving — look!” Nancy, though more deeply disappointed than any one else, felt somehow that she must defend Bubastis’ gift. “And I think it’s rather a nice little cup, myself. I’m going to take it downstairs and drink my milk from it every night. It looks as if it really wanted to be of some use in the world — not like Great-Uncle Peter’s pink-sprigged china, which feels too superior for words. I *like* your little cup, Bubastis.” She patted a stone paw consolingly.

“Let’s see the carving,” Natalie suggested. “Oh, it’s writing, isn’t it? Dug in with a sharp point of some kind while the clay was soft. What do you suppose it says?”

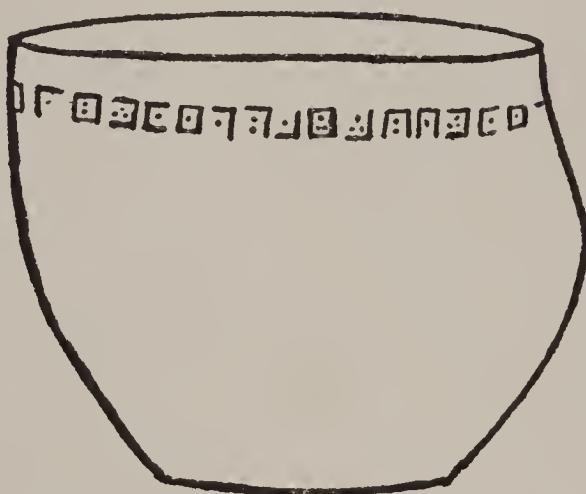
“I wonder.” Nancy followed the inscription with her finger. It ran, a single row, all around the outside of the top.

“Let me see.” Bernice took it into her hand and turned it thoughtfully around. “It isn’t like the writing on the Ali Baba jar, or the

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coffin lid, either. Those are all pictures — fishes and birds and funny-looking loops."

" Didn't the Egyptians have another sort of writing? " Natalie asked. " I remember in ancient history reading about the Rosetta stone. It had three inscriptions, and one of them was Greek, and one was hieroglyphics,



like your Ali Baba jar. What was the third, do you know? Could it have been Egyptian, too? It's scandalous the way I forget really important things — I'll never be an educated woman!"

" What was the Rosetta stone, anyway? " Nancy put in curiously. " I'm always coming across something about it in stories. Was it a jewel, in the shape of a rosette? That's the way I picture it, and it sounds so pretty."

Bernice laughed. "You're all wrong, Puss. It's more like a tombstone, I should say. A big tall slab of black rock, all carved over with ancient writing. I think it got its name from being found near the Rosetta River — isn't that right, Natalie?"

Natalie shook her head. "Don't ask me. I've told you all I could remember about it. Ancient history was my weakest subject."

"Well, I remember a lot," Bernice went on. "Not from my ancient history, though; it was while we were studying Napoleon's campaigns. He's my favorite historical character, and I just devoured everything I could find about him."

"Napoleon?" Nancy asked. "Why, what did he have to do with the Rosetta stone?"

"Well, nothing, I suppose, except — here's the story, honey, if you want to hear it. When Napoleon was at the very height of his glory, and really believed that he could conquer the whole world, he took an army into Egypt. He had an idea of getting across to India and seizing the British colonies there, only nothing ever came of it. Well, while his army was waiting around on the Nile, there wasn't much

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for them to do, and some of the younger officers amused themselves by digging in the old ruins there. Near the little Rosetta River they found this big black stone. Like everything else in Egypt, it was covered with writing, but one exciting thing about it was that some of this writing was Greek."

"And some of it was Egyptian, and it said the same thing," Natalie interrupted. "Like the 'No Smoking' sign they put up in factories, in different languages. The scholars of Napoleon's time could read Greek, of course, so they only had to compare the Greek words with the Egyptian signs to know what they stood for. Excuse me, Bernice — I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Oh, that was all of the story. The French carried the stone back with them, and a professor named Champollion gave his whole life to working out the Egyptian language from that stone. And that's how scholars to-day can read Egyptian hieroglyphics."

Nancy looked puzzled. "But how could the ancient Egyptians write Greek?"

"They couldn't. The Rosetta stone dates from hundreds of years after the Pharaohs;

the time that the Greeks conquered Egypt. That was around four hundred b. c., and pretty ancient to us, but their priests were then using a written language nearly two thousand years old; the same language their forefathers had used on the old tombs. I suppose the 'modern' priests of the Greek period could write Greek, too, or maybe some one else did the Greek part of it."

"What was it all about, anyway — the inscription on the stone?"

"Oh, nothing important. Just how noble the Greek king was, and how the people should set up his statue in their temples and honor him as a god. It was signed by the Egyptian priests, but I suppose the noble king put them up to it. Anyway, he didn't want any one to have an excuse to disobey, so he had it written three ways: Greek, hieroglyphics, and 'demotic.' "

"Demotic — that's the third one I was trying to remember!" Natalie exclaimed. "And I don't know now what it was."

"Why, it was Egyptian, too, but an easier kind that the common people could use, for their letters and everyday business. By

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that time only the priests used the old-fashioned hieroglyphics."

"Mercy, you do know a lot, Sis!" Nancy exclaimed admiringly. "I never guessed it!"

"I don't, really," Bernice laughed. "I only happen to know this little bit because I was assigned to look up the Rosetta stone in our French history class. I wish I really did know something useful; enough to read this inscription on your cup, for instance. I wonder if it could be Greek?"

"Well, it's certainly Greek to me!" Natalie said gaily. "We'll have to have a try at puzzling it out sometime — maybe Mr. Hallam left some books in his library that would help. Have you girls any idea what time it is? I'm supposed to make muffins for dinner. I must fly!"

Nancy, the cup tightly clasped in one hand, gave Bubastis a farewell pat as they turned to leave the room. "It'll be nice for milk, anyway. Thank you for giving it to me, kitty."

As they descended the stairs, after a wash and brush-up in the girls' room, Bernice drew Natalie back.

“I didn’t want to say any more about it before Nancy, she’s so excitable. But this Baretoes business, Natalie — I’m worried. If some one is breaking into our house — and I can’t imagine how he did it, for the doors and windows were locked tight last night! But if he did do it, and we know he did — well, oughtn’t something to be done about it? I just hate disturbing Daddy. He’s all wrapped up in his book, and if he has to stop and get his mind on barefooted burglars, it’s going to bother him dreadfully. Do you think I ought to tell him? ”

“Well, I suppose you ought,” Natalie answered uncertainly. “But I know just how you feel. Baretoes didn’t take anything, so far as we can make out, and if he never comes back and we never find out who he was you’ll just have your father all stirred up over nothing. I wonder if we’d dare — no, we couldn’t, unless — wait! ” She broke off abruptly, as Nancy turned at the foot of the stairs and called impatiently, “Are you two coming? ”

“Coming, darling! ” Natalie sang out, and to Bernice, as they descended the stairs, she whispered swiftly, “Ask me to come back after dinner and stay all night. I have a plan! ”

CHAPTER X

THE TRAP

“It isn’t the least bit of use,” Nancy announced calmly, appearing in the door of the girls’ room. Natalie and Bernice, who were sitting on the cushioned window seat with their heads very close together, started guiltily. Nancy advanced into the room and seated herself firmly on the footstool at their feet. “When you told me, right after the dishes were done, that I could make fudge, I knew something was up,” she went on. “And when Natalie came back with her pajamas under her arm and you two dashed up here, I was sure of it. The fudge is done — and very nice and creamy it is, too; you’d be surprised! So while it’s cooling in the kitchen, and before either of you get a mouthful, you’ll please just explain what this is all about.”

“Oh, Nancy, I do think —” Bernice began crossly.

“Don’t say it — you think I’m too young to know!” Nancy retorted. “You always fall back on that when you haven’t any good *reason*! Well, young or not, I’m in on this, whatever it is. And here I sit until I know ALL.”

“She’ll do it, too,” Bernice said to Natalie, and in spite of herself she could not help smiling down at her little sister’s determined face. “And I did want to keep her out of it! She had that fright with the gypsies yesterday, and she was awake in the night with some sort of brain-storm — please, Kitten!” She made her voice very coaxing. “Just go peaceably to bed and get a good night’s sleep, won’t you? And we’ll tell you all about it in the morning. Please!”

“Oh, so it’s coming off to-night, is it?” Nancy snapped. “Well, I’m not the least bit sleepy, so don’t count on that. If I have to spend the night dogging your footsteps, at least I’ll have a huge plate of fudge to keep my strength up. I made the double recipe, and it’s just too bad that I’ll have to eat it all myself, but no doubt I can worry it down. Go right ahead, don’t mind me.”

“Isn’t she awful?” Bernice appealed to Natalie, but the older girl only laughed. “I

think she's adorable — I wish she belonged to me. And I don't see any reason at all why she shouldn't be with us in this. There isn't going to be any danger, the way we've worked it out, so — ”

“ *Attagirl!* ” Nancy threw her arms about Natalie's knees in a joyous bear-hug. “ Let this be a lesson to you, Sister — somebody appreciates me, if you don't. And now go ahead and unfold your fell plot.”

“ Gracious, where does she get those expressions? ” Natalie chuckled.

“ Oh, the movies,” Bernice replied resignedly. “ All right, Natalie, you tell her. I suppose it can't be helped.”

“ That's the spirit,” Nancy applauded. “ And for that enthusiastic outburst, darling sister, you shall have your proper third of fudge, so cheer up. Proceed, Natalie. I'm all ears.”

Natalie rose and closed the door Nancy had left open. Then, returning to her seat, she beckoned Nancy to come closer, and spoke in a low, hushed tone.

“ Your father isn't to know — until afterward. Nothing may come of this at all, and if it doesn't, Bernice doesn't want him dis-

turbed. If it does, of course he'll have to know. So you must promise not to say anything — ”

“ I promise! ” Nancy interrupted impatiently. “ Never mind all that. What's it *about*, anyway? ”

“ Well, it's about the man who was in the Egyptian Room last night — Baretoes. It's almost certain he was looking for something, and that he was frightened away when he accidentally knocked over the stone slab. Now if he'd already found it, or if he gave up and decided it wasn't there, of course he won't come back. But if he didn't finish his search — and we only found the fresh footprints around one case, remember — why, we thought he might come back to-night. And we're going to hide in the disused bedroom nearest the Egyptian Room, and watch. That's all.”

“ Ooh — and to think I might have missed it! ” Nancy's eyes were shining. “ And what do we do when we catch him? Point a gun at him and say, ‘ Halt, villain! Hand over the ill-gotten loot? ’ Who holds the gun, and where do we get it? I'm sure there isn't such a thing in the house.”

“ Nothing like that.” Natalie's voice was

very firm. "And if you think you're going to be allowed to say a single word, you're sadly mistaken. We don't speak to him at all — he never even sees us. What we do is to wait till he is well inside the Egyptian Room, push the door shut, and lock it. Then we go wake up your father, and I get my father, too, in case Baretoes is armed, and let them deal with him. It's father's job, anyway, dealing with burglars. There, that's the plan. Does it appeal to you?"

"Well, not so very much," Nancy answered frankly. "Seems a little tame, if you want my opinion. It would be so much more thrilling to do it my way! I suppose I'd better not criticize, though, or Sis will begin harping on a nice peaceful night in bed for me. Natalie," she went on earnestly, "who do you think Baretoes *is*?"

"Well, of course I don't know," the other girl answered slowly. "But I can't help having a sort of suspicion. It's some one who knows the house, for he found his way to the Egyptian Room in the dark. He knows the room, too, for he opened the case without any trouble. And some one who knows what he's looking for! An ordinary burglar would be

far more likely to tackle the furnished rooms. And —”

“ Wait, I want to see if we’re thinking of the same man,” Nancy put in. “ He would be some one who’s used to going barefoot. Any-one might take off his shoes to keep from making a noise, but there’d be his socks, wouldn’t there? This man’s feet were *bare*! And the man I’m thinking of was barefooted when I saw him.”

“ You notice a lot, don’t you?” Natalie nodded. “ Though he wore American clothes, he was always barefooted about the house and yard. He wore shoes to market in winter, but that was all. Old Mrs. Dunn, in the bakery, was awfully scandalized at what she called his ‘heathen ways’.”

“ You *are* thinking of Uncle Peter’s servant, then! So was I. It couldn’t be any one else.”

“ I’ve been sure it was Ali all the time,” Bernice put in. “ Natalie’s father said he had been prowling around here, and I certainly saw him spying on us the first time we visited the Egyptian Room. And he put the fortune-teller up to trying to frighten us away — of course, he *would* do that if there was something

in the house he wanted to find! Probably he was afraid we'd find it first. It's getting clearer and clearer, when you reason it out."

"All but the mysterious something he's looking for — that's getting no clearer," Nancy objected. "Bubastis says it was the little yellow cup, but it couldn't have been, because it was right there in plain sight. I don't see why Bubastis wanted to fool me like that, when I asked him so nicely, and took so much trouble over it."

"There's something else!" Bernice was not listening. "You know the door to the little side porch, opening off the kitchen passage? We'd never used it, but to-day I thought I'd hang the dish-towels there to sun. Well, the door is locked, and not a key on the ring Mr. Charlton gave us fits it. So —"

"Ali always used that door!" Natalie chimed in excitedly. "It's on the side nearest our house, and I've seen him often, going out and coming in with his market basket. When Mr. Charlton took charge, Ali simply didn't hand over the key with the others. There's something in the house he wants, and he's not going to quit till he finds it."

“But what?” Bernice asked hopelessly. “If it was anything of his own, some possession he’d forgotten, he has only to come and ask. The attic bedroom he slept in had been carefully tidied, and I didn’t see anything in it that he could have overlooked. But if he left something —”

“*He* didn’t leave it,” Nancy protested. “Any one with a mean selfish face like his never forgot to take everything that belonged to him. This is something that doesn’t belong to him, something he knows he has no right to, you can be sure of that.”

“Well, it’s no use bothering our heads about it now,” Bernice said briskly. “Listen, there’s Daddy coming upstairs. Not a word! He won’t be long getting to sleep, poor dear! Authoring must be terribly tiring work, when you put in whole long days at it.”

“Who’s slandering an honorable profession?” Daddy demanded from the doorway, and Bernice jumped. He had not heard the first part of her remarks, however, so that was all right.

“Oh, Daddy, this is Natalie, the girl you’ve heard us talk so much about,” Bernice said, a

little breathlessly. "She's staying all night with us."

"That's nice." Mr. Enfield came into the room and gravely shook hands with the visitor. "Didn't a noble aroma of fudge greet my nostrils as I locked the kitchen door?" he inquired.

Nancy jumped up with a little cry. "Mercy, I forgot all about it. Wait here, Dads!"

When she returned, proudly bearing a plate piled high with rich brown squares, she found Daddy talking to Natalie with real interest. "This young lady knows something of politics herself, I find," he remarked, as he helped himself from the plate. "I'd like to meet your father, my dear," he went on. "The sheriff of a rural county gets a different slant on things from city politicians, and I'm sure he would be interested in what I'm trying to do in my book. Bring him over sometime when you call, won't you? The sooner the better."

"Thank you, Mr. Enfield, I surely will," Natalie answered. "Father wants to meet you, too. And I think — I think it's going to be quite soon." She glared at Nancy, who turned a beginning giggle into a cough.

"That will be fine," Mr. Enfield agreed heartily. "Well, bed's the place for a laboring man." He stretched and yawned. "The candy was delicious, Nancy girl. How about a good-night kiss? Good night, darlings; good night, Natalie. Don't sit up too late, girls — beauty sleep, you know."

When he was safely gone Natalie exclaimed, "Why, he's a darling! I never supposed an author would be just human, like that. And really, Bernice, the impression you gave me — 'Daddy mustn't be disturbed — we mustn't bother Daddy with it — don't go near the study, Daddy's working —' Why, I thought he must be an ogre!"

Bernice laughed. "I'm afraid it did sound that way. But you see, Natalie, it's like this. Daddy wants to do this book, and others like it, more than anything else in the world. And he's never had a chance to get started at it before. We've hardly any money, you know — just enough to see us through this summer, and only enough for that because there's no rent to pay, and living is cheaper here than in the city. When the summer is over and the money is gone — well, the book just has to be *done*,

if it's ever going to be. So every minute of Daddy's time is precious, and I just won't have it taken up with other things unless there's no way to help it."

"Good for you!" Natalie applauded. "And I suppose when the book is done it will make your fortune, and then all your worries will be over."

"N — No, I'm afraid we can't count on that," Bernice's face clouded. "Daddy's sort of books can't be best-sellers, you see. But *if* he gets it done, and *if* he finds a publisher right away, and *if* it has any sort of sale — well, there's a chance that it will bring in enough to keep us, and let him go on writing others. In the end, as he becomes established as an authority, it will mean a nice income from the work he loves, but it will take years. And everything hangs on this first book — with all those 'ifs'! And if they go wrong — if the book isn't finished, or doesn't get published — why, then there's nothing for Daddy to do but to go back to newspaper work again. And I don't see how I can *bear* it!"

"Bernice and I are the real trouble," Nancy put in. "If Daddy didn't have two expensive

daughters to clothe and feed and educate, he could write his books and live perfectly well on what they brought in. We're millstones around his neck, that's what we are."

"Nancy, you mustn't say such things." Bernice's voice was actually stern. "Daddy never felt that way about us, not for one minute. We mean more to him than a million books, and you ought to be ashamed to make Natalie think that he's — he's that kind!"

"But of course I didn't think it," Natalie soothed her. "Any one who has ever seen your father would know that you two girls are the whole world to him. It's too bad," she went on thoughtfully, "that he has to have this money-worry right now. It will be only a few years until you girls are able to look out for yourselves."

"That's it!" Bernice answered eagerly. "If we can just get through the next few years, and finish college and be self-supporting! I'm going to be a domestic-science teacher, did I tell you? And Nancy thinks she'll go in for dress-designing — she's frightfully artistic. It's just this in-between time that's the problem. We were so excited when Mr. Charlton wrote

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Daddy he was Uncle Peter's heir — it seemed like the answer to everything. And then when it turned out that there wasn't any money, just this old house that nobody else would have — well, it was disappointing."

"It was fierce!" Nancy burst out. "He could have left us the collection just as well as not, the stingy old thing! That was worth real money, and he had to go and give it to the University. It makes me furious! The lawyer told Daddy that Great-uncle was a really rich man when he got this Egyptian craze, and he put every cent he had into that miserable collection. If you ask me, I think there ought to be a law against such things!"

"Oh, well, calm down, chicken," Bernice passed a tender hand over the tumbled golden curls against her knee. "We've got a roof over our heads, anyhow, and what Great-Uncle Peter did with his money was his own business. As Daddy says, we'll manage some way; we always have. And now — Daddy's light has been out for quite a while; he must be sound asleep by this time. I'll go down to the library and get the Egyptian Room key."

"Here it is," Nancy produced it from the

pocket of her middy. "I brought it up when I went after the fudge. We'd better take a flashlight, don't you think? So we can find the keyhole quickly — those corridors are as dark as a pocket at night."

"All right, I'll get it." Bernice went to the dresser drawer and produced the small flashlight Daddy had given her for her last birthday. She looked around, considering. "Is there anything else we ought to take with us? We don't want to be running back and forth. Can you think of anything, girls?"

"The fudge," Nancy answered promptly. "It may be a long wait, and excitement always makes me hungry. Ready, Natalie? Oh, I'm so thrilled! Do hurry!"

"Careful passing Daddy's door," Bernice cautioned.

One by one the three small figures stole silently down the dark corridor. Their room opened on to one of the side passages; they had to go back to the stairhead and take the main corridor from there. Nancy gave a fearful glance down the shadowy stairs as they scurried by — what if Baretoes were already in the house? Nothing stirred, however, and in a few

brief minutes they reached the unused chamber nearest the Egyptian Room.

They decided against turning on the lights, for fear of attracting attention from outside the house. Bernice's flashlight showed a great dim bedchamber, looking more like a dark cave than anything else. A heavy brass bed gleamed in one corner; from the opposite wall a dark-framed mirror reflected the torchlight.

“Let's get the pillows,” Natalie whispered. They dragged them from the bed, two square pillows and a long roll bolster. Because Nancy was shivering a little, Bernice brought the thick eiderdown quilt, too, and the three girls, closing the door to a narrow crack, huddled on the floor before it, the pillows under them and the warm coverlet over their shoulders. Nancy transferred the fudge to her lap, setting the plate carefully out of the way, “so I won't walk on it when I leap up,” she explained. She found a resting place against her sister's shoulder, and fixed her eyes on the crack. “If I see him first, what shall I do?” she demanded in an excited whisper.

“Sh!” Bernice whispered back. “Don't do anything, silly, except hold your breath.

We'll give him plenty of time to get quite a way into the room before we close the door. Maybe he'll close it himself — I should, in his place. Anyway, we'll wait a minute or two, and then — ”

“ Let's divide up,” Natalie suggested, in the same whispered tones. “ One of us take the key — all right, you, Bernice. Nancy shall hold the flash, and I'll close the door, if he leaves it open, and find the keyhole. We'll have to move quickly and quietly, so he won't hear a thing till he's safely locked in.”

“ Fine!” Bernice agreed. “ And no one is to move until I say 'Now!' no matter what we see. Then we'll all act at once, and there won't be any chance of spoiling things.”

“ You're sure about the windows?” Natalie asked anxiously. “ It would be terrible if he escaped that way, after he'd walked into our trap.”

“ Not a chance,” Bernice replied confidently. “ Every one of them has strong iron bars, so close together a cat couldn't get through. No, if Mr. Baretoes is foolish enough to stick his head into that room to-night, we've got him.”

“ Oh, if he'd only hurry!” Nancy gave a

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little squirm of impatience. "I don't see how I'm going to stand it, waiting here in the dark!"

"Well, if you'd rather go to bed," her sister began, but Nancy silenced her by cramming a square of fudge into her mouth.

"I don't think we'd better talk any more," Natalie whispered, feeling about for the square Nancy held ready for her. "It's getting late. If anything is going to happen — and mind you, we may have all our trouble for nothing! — But if anything *is* going to happen, it oughtn't to be long now."

CHAPTER XI

WILL HE COME?

As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, Nancy could make out the Egyptian Room door, and the bit of passage the narrow crack showed. The fateful door was closed, but not locked, just as they had found it when they began their explorations this afternoon. The gloom was so deep that she was not sure she would be able to make out a figure, should one appear, but she consoled herself by thinking that he would have to make some sound in turning the knob, even though he came barefooted over the thick carpet. She wondered with a little shudder what would happen if he should open this door instead, and find the three of them crouched there on the floor. Funny the older girls hadn't thought of that, when they were working out a plan that should be perfectly safe — and tame!

That was foolish, though. Baretoes knew

his way well enough; *he* wouldn't go wandering about among the uninhabited rooms. He was after something, and he knew, or thought he knew, that it was to be found in the Egyptian Room.

For the thousandth time Nancy asked herself, "What *could* it be?" She had had the queerest feeling this afternoon, when they were experimenting with the stone cat. It was exactly the sort of feeling she got sometimes when they played "I Spy" — a feeling of being "warm," even before she actually saw the hidden thimble. Just for a moment, while she crouched in front of Bubastis and strained to look exactly where he was looking, she had been excitedly sure that the secret was about to be revealed to her. And then it had all ended in disappointment — just a common little clay cup which wasn't even pretty.

From far below came the muffled tones of the old clock. Only eleven — surely it had been more than an hour since they kissed Daddy good night? To Nancy, it seemed that they had crouched here in the dark for centuries. "My foot's asleep," she muttered, but Bernice and Natalie said, "Sh!" together, and she

straightened out her crossed legs in careful silence.

Bernice shifted her own position a little, to make Nancy more comfortable against her shoulder. The long minutes dragged slowly by, and no sound or movement came from the dark hall they watched so intently.

There was no wind to-night, and the air was so still that the lonesome hoot of a railroad train far in the distance came plainly to them. The clock struck again, the half-hour; and ages after that, it seemed, it struck the hour again.

Nancy's head drooped heavily against her sister; she was wondering if it would be safe to close her eyes just for a second. She tried it, and found it so deliciously restful that she decided to keep them that way for a few minutes, keeping her ears extra wide open to make up. Presently, over her head, Bernice breathed softly to Natalie, "She's off!" Nancy heard nothing at all, for she was wandering in the pleasant land of dreams.

Bernice's own lids were beginning to droop now, and she began to think with longing of her soft bed. After all, this was rather a silly business! She was cramped and uncomfortable

as she sat, and she was afraid to move for fear of waking her sister. Surely Ali would have been here by now if he had meant to come? She wondered if Natalie would despise her if she suggested that they give it up and go to bed.

She stirred, and opened her mouth to speak. But before she could do so, she felt Natalie's hand reach out and grip hers tightly. "Listen!" The whisper was merely a breath, but Bernice was suddenly wide awake, every nerve tingling.

For a long minute she heard nothing, and then — very faintly, but quite distinctly, came the creaking of the stairboards. And after that — hours after, it seemed to the waiting girls — there came a rustling in the corridor, the lightest possible impression of pattering feet on the thick carpet — and a Shadow darker than the shadows in the hall, flitted past the crack of their door. Their long vigil had not been in vain, after all. Baretoes had come!

As Bernice, in her eagerness to see, bent forward, Nancy roused. Instantly Bernice's hand covered her mouth, but there was no need. Little Nancy, quick-witted as always, had realized everything in the moment of waking.

With the silent swiftness of the cats she admired, she was on her feet, her finger on the button of the flashlight.

Slowly and cautiously the older girls rose also. Bernice stooped to push the pillows out of the way so that they could open the door. As she straightened, and looked again toward the crack, the Egyptian Room door creaked slightly. The Shadow was gone.

“It’s all right — he went in and closed the door after him,” Natalie whispered in her ear. “Is the key ready?”

“Right here!” Bernice whispered back. “Nancy?”

“Ready!”

For a full minute they waited, motionless, every muscle tense. Then Bernice, gathering a deep breath, whispered, “Now!”

More silent than the Shadow himself, the three girls stole out into the corridor. Natalie, groping in the dark, found the keyhole and guided Bernice’s hand to it. Nancy flashed the light. Her sister inserted the huge key, and as quietly as she could turned it in the lock.

They had triumphed. Baretoes was their prisoner!

CHAPTER XII

BARETOES

“All right, girls, you can come in now.” Sheriff Clarke, though he wore an overcoat over pajamas, had looked terrifyingly stern as he advanced to open the Egyptian Room door; his curt command that the girls wait in their own room until he called them had been willingly obeyed.

Natalie had run home for her father the instant the key was safely turned, while the Enfield girls went to rouse their own father. Both men had been utterly bewildered on being wakened with the tale of the midnight adventure, and the sisters suspected that their Daddy, at least, was more than half inclined to treat it as a nightmare. But Mr. Clarke had instantly taken command of the situation, and had marched down the corridor, revolver in hand, while Mr. Enfield followed close on his heels.

When Sheriff Clarke's hearty voice echoed down the hall, summoning them to the Egyptian Room, they responded on flying feet. The electric lights were blazing now, and Daddy, also in pajamas, with his hair still ruffled from the pillow, lounged against the stone cat. Natalie's father had found himself a seat on the window sill. Before him, safely handcuffed, and looking very small and miserable, stood the "dressed-up gypsy," Ali. His feet were bare, and he shuffled them uneasily in the dusty floor as he waited with downcast eyes for what should happen next.

Natalie perched on the window sill beside her father, while Bernice and Nancy settled themselves on the platform where the stone cat stood, drawing Daddy down between them. Anxious as they had been for adventure, they were very glad to leave the handling of their captive to two grown men; one of them an officer of the law. But their eyes were shining with eagerness, and Mr. Clarke smiled approvingly as he said:

"Well, young ladies, here is your prisoner! He didn't put up any fight; I found him sitting cross-legged on the floor, waiting for me. I

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suppose when he heard the key turn in the lock he knew it was all up, and he didn't want to make it any worse by resisting arrest. He hasn't any weapon, and he's perfectly harmless with the bracelets on, so you needn't feel a bit uneasy."

"Oh, we're not afraid of him," Nancy broke in. "But we're just dying of curiosity. What does he say he came for?"

"Well, now, I haven't questioned him yet — thought you three were entitled to hear his story, since you made the capture. We'll get at it now. Speak up, you. We know that you are Ali, old Mr. Hallam's Arab servant, and that you hang out down at the gypsy camp. What —"

"If the gentleman please," Ali interrupted, in a whining voice, "I am no Arab. I am Egyptian, of the *fellahin* class. The Romany peoples in the hollow are my blood, though their fathers come from Mother Egypt many ages since. Gypsy is ignorant English word. It is not —"

"Never mind that," Mr. Clarke cut in sharply. "We're not here for a geography lesson. Get on with it. How did you get into

Mr. Enfield's house, and what for? The truth, now."

"I come in with key," Ali answered sullenly.

"To the little side door — we guessed that!" Bernice exclaimed excitedly. Ali shot her a baleful glare, but nodded.

"Don't interrupt, honey," Daddy warned.

"Go on," the sheriff was saying. "You came to steal, didn't you?"

"No!" Ali's eyes flamed. "Not to steal! One does not steal his own!"

"I don't get you." Mr. Clarke's voice was puzzled. "I think you'd better open up and tell us the whole story, Ali. You're going to jail, anyway, you know, and it'll go easier with you if you tell a straight story now."

"I have done no wrong!" At the word "jail" Ali's dark face seemed to whiten. "You have searched me — I have stolen nothing. I did not break into this house; I entered with the key my master gave me. I have done no wrong!"

"Well, we'll be the judge of that," Mr. Clarke answered impatiently. "What we want to know right now is — what were you searching for in this room?"

Ali did not answer for a moment, and Nancy held her breath. At last they were to know the secret which had so perplexed them, the object of Baretoes' search. What *could* it be?

Ali glanced from one face to another, and then, with a shrug of his shoulders, seemed to resign himself to telling the truth. "I seek the Girdle of Isis — and it is mine!" he answered defiantly.

"And just what do you mean by that?" Mr. Clarke pursued.

"I will tell." Ali cleared his throat, and glanced sidewise into the stern face of his questioner, as if to see whether there were mercy there. "I will tell all, kind gentleman, and you will see there is no fault in me. Many years ago, before I am born, before my father is born, my father's father dwell in the valley of the Nile. He is rich man; he have his own plot of ground for the cotton-growing. But comes hard times, cotton crop fails, my father's father must seek coolie work to keep his old parents from to starve. So he becomes — what you call it? — he goes to dig among the old tombs, for a mad English gentleman who respects not the dead. For a miserable few

pennies a day my father's father dig, with many others. Oh, long, cruel work that digging, and my father's father not of that low class!"

"Just a minute!" Mr. Enfield interrupted. "Your grandfather worked at excavating with some scientific expedition — is that it? Do you know the English gentleman's name?"

"I not knowing," Ali answered sullenly. "He is a madman, but very rich. He uncover ancient tombs and temples, sealed for centuries. Shameful it is! And what he find he take to England, for to display to infidel English. Not even for himself does he keep, but give all to great English display-house. House being called British Mu — Mu — I cannot say it."

"British Museum," Mr. Enfield supplied interestedly. "All right, go on, Ali; I just wanted to get that straight."

"My father's father work many days for few pennies," Ali continued. "One day they digging out ancient temple, what the Old Ones build to old goddess Isis. You know her?"

"We've heard of her," Mr. Clarke supplied. "And what happened?"

"I not knowing, exactly. But in ancient temple is image of Lady Isis, wearing many

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jewels. And she speak to my father's father, telling him the gold girdle about her waist is for him, to pay his debts and free him from this penny digging work. She do this because his people in old time worship her, and she think kindly of him. She say take, and tell no one. My father's father fear to disobey lady goddess. He good Mussulman, you understand, but old goddess very strong still. She say — ”

“ Never mind what the goddess said,” the sheriff interrupted drily. “ It is plain enough that your grandfather made up that little fairy tale about the time he decided to steal the girdle and cheat the English gentleman. How did he get away with it? ”

“ Not knowing,” Ali repeated. “ I tell as my father tell me. My father's father take the golden girdle and go to his home, hiding it. There is big search. The mad Englishman make such a to-do my father's father fear to try to sell the golden girdle. Allah sends good growing to the cotton then, and my father's father needs not the gift, so he keep it many years hidden away. When he die it become my father's. He too fear to sell it, and it come

to me. I am poor man, I would sell. But alas, would English police understand it was goddess gift to my father's father?"

"I rather think they wouldn't," Mr. Clarke answered. "But you sold it secretly to Mr. Hallam — is that it?"

"I so do. Master mad also, more as English gentleman. I go to him as guide; he ask where one may buy old treasures. I help him buy many. One day he speak of Girdle of Isis. Mad digging English gentleman have written book, speak of lost girdle he see on image long ago. Master say he like very well see that girdle. Not at once, but at last I tell him I having friend have that girdle, maybe can get if he say nothing. He say tell friend he will pay ten thousand dollar and ask no question. I arrange everything, and girdle goes to him. He very pleased. Smuggle it to America. All very nice."

"I should think so," the sheriff agreed. "You make up a 'friend' so Mr. Hallam will not know you are the grandson of the thief. And he pays you ten thousand dollars for the jewel. That made you a pretty rich man in your country, didn't it? How does it happen

that you became Mr. Hallam's servant in America?"

Ali spread his hands in a gesture of despair. "I am young man then, and money go, this way and that way. It is master's first time in Luxor this happen, you understand. After he go with the jewel I live like rich man; many friends, much feasting. When he come back another time I am poor man again, Allah help me. Master say I can come to America with him. I come."

"Well, let's get back to the jewel. Where is it now?"

Ali rolled his eyes helplessly about the room. "If I could know!"

"You mean you *don't* know?" Mr. Clarke considered. "You say he smuggled it out of the country; of course if he applied for a permit to take it out the authorities would recognize it as stolen property. Probably he didn't dare display it here with his other treasures for the same reason. Did he keep it in this room?"

"In locked casket in case there." Ali pointed to one of the central cases. "Always he keep it there. He take it out when none is here,

and look long time — he let me look, too, but no one else. He keep it there always, until — until —” Ali faltered badly, and kept his eyes on his bare feet.

“ Go on! ”

“ I serve master well,” Ali whined. “ He old man, and feeble, I tend him like baby. I knowing and he, too, that he not live for always. And one day I say to him, when he no longer here, I like have back goddess gift, please. And he — he take it from casket and put it somewhere else. I see it never any more.”

“ Well, that’s plain enough,” Mr. Clarke said grimly. “ You let him see that you’ve got your eye on the jewel, and he hides it away so you can’t steal it.”

“ Only when he is gone would I take it! ” Ali protested. “ I am faithful servant, me! And to take it then would not be to steal, for it is mine. Did not the Lady Isis give it to my father’s father? ”

“ Did you ever hear such a thing! ” Bernice whispered to Nancy. “ He sells it to Great-Uncle Peter for ten thousand dollars, and then claims it’s still his. I never —”

“ I’m afraid Mr. Hallam didn’t have so much

confidence in you, after that demand," the sheriff pursued. "How long was it before his death that he hid the jewel?"

"About five year, I think," Ali answered sulkily. "And whatever he think, never, while he live, do I try to find it. But after he is gone — ah, that is different. I have right to search then for what is mine."

"You searched before to-night, didn't you, Ali?" Natalie put in. "You were here last night?"

"Last night, and many nights before. Had not these strangers come, I might have succeeded, curse them! No, no, I not meaning that!" he cringed as Mr. Clarke started to speak. "I having only kind feelings to my master's kin, yes indeed."

"Yes, indeed — so kind that you did your best to frighten them away so you could go on with your search," the sheriff rejoined. "But we're not interested in your feelings. *Did* you find any trace of the golden girdle?"

"No sign," Ali answered wearily. "The Golden Girdle of Isis is gone away. Maybe the old goddess take it back again. Who knows?"

CHAPTER XIII

THE LETTER

“Oh, come, that won’t do,” Mr. Enfield said impatiently. “You must have some idea of where your master put it. Probably it was taken to the University with the rest of the collection.”

“Not so!” Ali shook his head. “I am here, I help those men to pack. They have taken the inlaid casket where once the girdle live, but it is empty. Beside, master have not wish that school-college shall have the girdle. When he is sick I attend him, and just before the end he write —”

He stopped abruptly. “What did he write?” the sheriff demanded.

“Nothing,” Ali answered. “I — I forget what I would say. It is nothing.”

Natalie’s father glanced at Mr. Enfield. “I think we’re getting at something at last,” he murmured. To Ali he said severely, “You have gone too far to stop now. You do not

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leave this room until you tell us the truth, all of it. What did Mr. Hallam write before he died? Answer me."

There was very little spirit left in Ali. With a sigh of resignation he answered. "It is a letter. He tell me to mail it to the lawyer man. And afterward, I — I forget."

"I bet you did," Mr. Clarke remarked. "Kept it for yourself, eh? Guessed that it related to the golden girdle, and didn't want the lawyer to know. Have you got the letter with you now?"

Ali gestured toward his felt hat which had rolled to the floor. Nancy was the first to pounce upon it, and her eager fingers quickly drew a folded paper from the inner band. It was soiled and creased, she noticed as she handed it to Mr. Clarke.

He unfolded it and read aloud:

"DEAR CHARLTON:

"I'm pretty close to the end of the road. I've been lying here, going over my whole life, wishing I could undo many things.

"I was too harsh with Lydia, Charlton. She was a frivolous, gay little thing, overfond of jewels and dress, but with a sensitive, loyal heart beneath it all. We quarreled because I

scolded her for thinking too much of gewgaws, and in her hurt pride she never forgave me. I was all to blame, and I have gone lonely and wretched all these years for punishment.

“There is something I have had on my mind to speak to you about. On my first trip to Egypt, immediately after Lydia broke off our engagement, I bought the Golden Girdle of Isis. I was half-crazed with grief, and I thought to bring it to Lydia, to ask her pardon. We had quarreled over jewels; I hoped to make amends by giving her the loveliest jewel I had ever seen.

“It was not to be. When I returned I found her the happy bride of another. It was too late to offer my gift.

“The golden girdle is hateful to me now, but I have kept it all these years. And since I shall go soon to the land where perhaps Lydia will listen and forgive, I am troubled about the thing.

“In the photograph you showed me, of my unknown nephew and his family, there was a little girl with golden curls and laughing eyes — like *hers*. I forget the child’s name. But I should like her to have the girdle. Will you put this in my will?

“The girdle is in a safe place, hidden from my servant who I think would steal it if he could. Long ago I wrote down directions to the hiding-place, concealing the clue in such a way that it would not easily be found. You will

laugh at these precautions, but Ali is sly, and there are reasons why I could not have him arrested if he stole the treasure.

“If you will call upon me to-morrow with the altered will, I will tell you where I have put the jewel. The child is to keep it or sell it, as she sees fit. Perhaps it will bring her more happiness than it ever brought me.

“Faithfully yours,

“PETER JAMES HALLAM.”

Mr. Clarke refolded the paper thoughtfully. “Did Mr. Charlton see your master again before the end?” he asked.

“No, kind gentleman. My poor master die the next day but one. All the time he talk only of a lady name Lydia. I think he — what you call — delirious, yes? He speak not of letter or jewel again.”

“Poor Uncle Peter!” Nancy spoke impulsively. “I do think Lydia might have waited a little longer before becoming a happy bride, anyway. He must have loved her terribly.”

“He spoke of going to a land where she would listen and forgive,” Bernice said softly. “She had died years before, Mr. Charlton told

us. Perhaps — perhaps it's all right between them, now. I hope so!"

"Well, Nancy girl," her father turned to her, "Great-Uncle Peter evidently meant to make you the heiress of the golden girdle. That much is clear, anyway?"

"Me?" She asked amazedly. "Oh — why, so he did! I was thinking so hard I didn't take in that part of the letter. Isn't that lovely!"

"But remember, Puss, we haven't found it yet," her sister said gently. "How about those written directions, Mr. Clarke? Do you think Ali knows anything of them?"

Mr. Clarke turned to Ali, who shook his head dolefully. "He's told us all he knows, I think," the sheriff decided. "If he'd had any clue to the hiding-place, he'd have been off with the treasure long ago. What I'm wondering now is just what we'd better do with him. It's up to you, Mr. Enfield. Do you want to charge him with housebreaking, or what?"

"Oh, please, kind gentleman!" the gypsy began feverishly, but Mr. Enfield waved him to silence.

"I think not, on the whole," he said slowly. "It would be a nuisance to me, having to inter-

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rupt my work and appear at his trial. He's done no real harm here, and he's given us what may be valuable information. I suggest that you turn him loose, with a warning to get out of town and stay out."

"That's what I thought," the sheriff agreed. "It's more trouble than it's worth to bother with him, and if this romantic story about a lost treasure gets into the newspapers you'll be pestered with a horde of sightseers. You hear, Ali? This gentleman has kindly consented to let you go, but only on condition that you and your gang leave town at once and keep away. Get that?"

The man began chattering his thanks, but Mr. Clarke interrupted to say sternly, "And no more nonsense about the girdle being yours, either. Mr. Hallam paid you a fair price for it, and it belongs to his estate now. You understand that?"

"The goddess gave—" Ali began stubbornly, but under the sheriff's steely gaze he changed to "Yes, kind gentleman. I say nothing, nothing, and I go far away. Is it permitted that I go now?"

"The sooner the better. Better look through

your pockets again, I guess, and make sure you're not getting away with anything. Nothing, eh? Here's your doorkey, Mr. Enfield." He unlocked the handcuffs and released Ali's wrists. "Come along, I'll see you to the door. And remember, if I catch you within twenty miles of this place again it's jail for yours. Now. Forward, *March!*"

CHAPTER XIV

SOMETHING ABOUT THE GIRDLE

At Daddy's request, Mr. Charlton called upon them the following afternoon. Bernice brought mint lemonade, and cup-cakes of her own baking to the library, and the dry old lawyer's face softened into approval.

"You have mighty capable girls, Mr. Enfield, I can see that," he remarked, glancing about the orderly room. "Very unusual nowadays, to find young girls who take an interest in domestic affairs. Most of 'em haven't a thought beyond dressing up and gadding about."

"Like Lydia," observed the irrepressible Nancy, who had curled herself cosily on the arm of Daddy's armchair. She had quite decided that Mr. Charlton's bark was worse than his bite. "She was dreadfully frivolous, wasn't she, Mr. Charlton?"

"Do you mean Mr. Hallam's fiancée? Bless my soul, child, who has been gossiping to you?"

Yes, I suppose we must call her frivolous, though she was so beautiful it's no wonder her head was turned. But what brought her to your mind? Have you girls found some of the old gentleman's love letters?"

"Not exactly," Bernice answered. "It's a letter, but it's to you, Mr. Charlton. Oh, do tell him, Daddy. We can't wait any longer."

Smiling, Mr. Enfield complied. Assisted by the eager girls, he told the whole story of the midnight prowler, of his capture, and of the strange tale Ali had told.

"I'd be inclined to think it was just a fairy tale," he ended. "A yarn the Egyptian made up when we caught him, to cover his misdoings. But — here is the letter which he says Great-Uncle Peter wrote to you, and which was never mailed. Perhaps you'll just look it over and tell us if it is my uncle's handwriting?"

The lawyer adjusted his glasses and frowningly read the letter through. "It was undoubtedly written by my client," he announced, when he had finished. "But it's such a wild story — like you, I have difficulty in believing it. Mr. Hallam never discussed Miss Stone with me, and he certainly gave me no hint that

he possessed this treasure. He was the last man on earth I'd have suspected of such sentiment!"

"He was very ill when he wrote this, if Ali's story is true," said Mr. Enfield thoughtfully. "Perhaps that accounts for his unburdening his mind in a way not usual with him."

"It would, of course — I have known such things to happen before. Well, there it is, in black and white. Unless Mr. Hallam was wandering in his mind, and the victim of delusions, he did possess such a jewel, and he meant me to alter his will so that it would go to the young miss here with golden curls and laughing eyes. Miss — Nancy, is it? Well, well, well! Strange things do happen. And what would you do with the girdle, Miss Nancy, supposing we found it? Wear it around your waist to parties, and make all the other girls jealous?"

"*Oh, no!*!" Nancy's reply was emphatic. "I'd love to see it, and handle it, of course — it must be a beautiful thing! Yes, I think I'd try it on, too — I don't think I could help wanting to do that. But after that, I wouldn't want to keep it. I'd sell it to some Museum — it must be worth heaps and heaps of money! And



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I'd put the money in the bank, and Sis would never have to worry again about affording a new coat, or about Daddy having to go back to the newspaper, or —" she stopped, confused, wondering if she had said too much of family affairs to this stranger.

Daddy patted her head reassuringly. "It's all right, dear, Mr. Charlton knows all about our circumstances. And bless your generous little heart, we know you mean every word of it!"

"Well, well, let's not be counting our chickens too soon." The old lawyer spoke gruffly, but his eyes were very kind. "The first thing is to find this fabulous treasure. It's easy to see why Ali did not mail the letter, since he hoped to steal it. As long as no one knew it existed, he would have been quite safe in making way with it. The Golden Girdle of Isis! Now where have I heard of that before? Not from Mr. Hallam, I'll take my oath. Somewhere, quite recently — if I could only remember!"

"Ali said it was mentioned in a book written by the 'mad Englishman,'" Bernice ventured. "Perhaps you read about it there."

Mr. Charlton shook his head. "I'm no Egyptologist — never read such a book in my life," he replied. "No, it's been somewhere — if I could only think —"

"No one answered my knock, so I walked right in," came a gay voice from the hallway. "Are you — oh, I didn't know you had company!" Natalie, standing in the door, stopped suddenly.

Mr. Charlton peered at her through his glasses. "Oh, it's Tom Clarke's girl. Mercy, child, how you do grow. Come in, come in; I understand you were the third heroine in this exploit last night."

Natalie responded politely to his greeting, and to that of Mr. Enfield. "I didn't mean to interrupt," she said shyly. "It's just — I found something about the Girdle of Isis, and I thought you'd want to see it."

From under her arm she produced the magazine section of a Sunday newspaper.

"That's it!" Mr. Charlton exclaimed. "I remember now, I read the thing several weeks ago. An article called 'The Romance of Missing Treasure,' isn't it?"

"Yes, sir." Natalie folded the paper back

to an inside page. "When Ali spoke of the girdle last night I was sure it was mentioned in this article, but I didn't say anything for fear I might be mistaken. I went through a whole pile of papers in the attic this morning before I found it again. Wait — here it is."

Mr. Charlton took the paper, and began reading aloud where her finger pointed.

"Next to the mystery of the Idol's Eye, perhaps the strangest is that of the Golden Girdle of Isis. In 1868, Sir Francis Huddleston unearthed a ruined temple of Isis near Luxor. The shrine contained a life-size statue of the goddess, adorned with blazing jewels. Sir Francis and his associates were especially impressed with a girdle of gold filigree, wrought with great delicacy and studded with precious stones, which encircled the idol's waist. He gave orders that the underground room was to be shut up until the next day, when he could make arrangements to remove the statue in its entirety. When that time came, although there were no signs that the room had been entered, the girdle had disappeared. The most thorough search was made, but to this day its whereabouts remain a mystery. The reward of three thousand pounds which Sir Francis promptly offered for its recovery has never been claimed'."

"Well, that doesn't tell us much," Bernice observed.

"No," her father agreed, "but it confirms Ali's story. There *is* such a thing as the golden girdle, and it was undoubtedly stolen by one of the workmen. If that much of his story is true, the rest seems reasonable enough. Your inheritance really seems to exist, Nancy."

"Whom does the girdle actually belong to Mr. Charlton?" Bernice asked unexpectedly. "I mean — of course Great-Uncle Peter considered it his, because he bought it from Ali. But Ali had no right to sell it — or did he have? For of course he didn't steal it in the first place. But wouldn't it still belong to Sir Francis Huddleston?"

The lawyer's eyes twinkled. "Don't forget, my dear, that Sir Francis was engaged in taking it — certainly without *her* permission! — from the goddess Isis. You've brought up a tangled legal question, Miss Bernice, and I am delighted to see that you have a keen mind as well as the more feminine gifts. The actual title to the jewel would be a question for the courts to determine."

"But Great-Uncle Peter gave it to *me*!"

Nancy wailed. "Do you mean that it wouldn't be mine, then, even if we found it?"

"A compromise safeguarding your interests could undoubtedly be reached," Mr. Charlton answered bafflingly. "That means, my dear, that you would be sure of realizing some money from it; enough, I should say, to remove the worries you spoke of. That was what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes." Nancy looked relieved. "That's *all* I want! So if we can just find it — but we're no nearer finding it than ever!"

Mr. Charlton took Mr. Hallam's letter and carefully examined it again. "—'Directions to the hiding-place, concealing the clue in such a way that it would not be easily found.' Humph — now what did he mean by that? He was going to tell me when I called the next day, poor old chap! A thousand pities that I never got his message. Oh, well, cheer up, little lady. Nothing is impossible, you know. There *must* be a way to solve the mystery, if we can only find it."

CHAPTER XV

PUDGE DIGS

Three days had passed since Ali's capture, days of high excitement ending in bitter disappointment. Daddy, Mr. Charlton, and Natalie's father, eagerly aided by the girls, had ransacked Hallam House from cellar to garret in an earnest attempt to find the golden girdle. They had begun with the Egyptian Room, so thoroughly searched already by Ali and the girls; and when it yielded nothing, had gone on until every room in the house had been completely explored. They found absolutely nothing; neither the girdle itself nor the written directions at which Mr. Hallam's letter had hinted.

It began to seem to the grown-up searchers that the whole matter must have been a delusion of Great-Uncle Peter's. This conclusion left Ali's strange actions unexplained, as Nancy hastened to point out, but Mr. Clarke said dis-

gustedly that no one could account for the doings of a barefooted heathen, anyway.

The sheriff was a busy man, with work waiting for him, and Daddy was anxious to get back to his book. Mr. Charlton alone seemed to share the girls' firm belief that the golden girdle was somewhere in Hallam House, but he, too, was obliged to give it up and confess that the puzzle was too much for him.

Now, on this third afternoon, Daddy had again shut himself into the study with his writing, and the three girls were hemming tea towels on the vine-shaded back porch. Natalie had brought guests with her; her baby brother and the black-and-white kitten. Two-year-old Pudge, with his little spade, was digging happily in the soft earth at the edge of the porch, and the kitten was curled in a furry ball in Nancy's lap.

They had discussed the mystery over and over again, until there seemed nothing left to say or to wonder about. Their talk turned to books they had read, moving pictures they had seen. The Enfield sisters were delighted to find that Natalie shared their tastes; that she adored their favorite heroines and detested

their most-hated villains. They were deep in happy chatter when little Pudge laid down his spade and came to pull his sister's dress.

"Dwink, Dista!" he commanded. "Pudge so firsty. Pudge dwink!"

"I'll get it." Bernice jumped up. "He's such a darling, Natalie; the way he tries to say 'Sister' is adorable. Say 'Aunt Bernice,' Pudgie," she coaxed, dropping a kiss on the downy yellow head. "I'll bring you a nice cold cup of milk if you'll say 'Drink, Aunt Bernice'!"

The baby smiled winningly. "Dwink, An' Bee-meece," he echoed, and with a laugh and a hug Bernice disappeared into the house.

She returned with Nancy's little Egyptian cup brimming with rich milk. "Oh, you shouldn't, he might drop it," Natalie warned, but Bernice only laughed. "He won't, because he's going to sit on Aunty's lap and she's going to hold it. Isn't that right, Pudge, old fellow?"

"Milk tastes better from Bubastis' cup," Nancy put in. "Oh, you needn't laugh, it does. I've never used anything else since we found it. It's good, isn't it, Pudge? Extra good?"

The baby smacked his lips over the rim. "Essadood!" he agreed, and drank with greedy little gurglings. When he had finished Bernice set the empty cup against the porch pillar and cuddled the baby in her arms. "Stay with Aunt Bernice, sweetheart," she begged. "You've dug for over an hour; you'll wear yourself out. Rest a bit and I'll tell you a story."

The little fellow squirmed impatiently. "No! Pudge dig. Dig dee-eep, dig Shine! Pudge go now — dig Shine!"

"He's digging to China," Natalie interpreted. "You wouldn't halt an important event like that, would you, Bernice? He's had a perfect craze the last few days. Some one told him if you dug deep enough, you'd come to China, and he's determined to prove it. You might as well let him down."

"How funny!" Bernice gave the fat little body a final squeeze and set him gently on his feet. "I remember hearing the same thing when I was tiny, and the sad part of it was I never had a chance to try it out. I did start a lovely hole in Lincoln Park, but a policeman came along and was quite cross about it."

"It can't be much fun, being a city child," Natalie observed. "You miss so much; the trees and the birds and flowers, and playing in your own back yard. Didn't you just hate it?"

"Oh, no!" Bernice answered cheerfully. "You see, we didn't know we were missing anything. And there are lots of wonderful places to go that you don't have here — the museums, and the zoo, and the beach, and all that. Of course we're enjoying every minute here in Rosemont, because it's so different, but if you came to Chicago you'd find just as many new things to enjoy."

"Daddy says it isn't where you are, it's what you are that makes you happy," Nancy volunteered. "That would be just one of those tiresome 'elevating thoughts' if a teacher said it, but Daddy makes you see that it really means something. Ho, hum, it's a sleepy day. What's that big bug that keeps buzzing around the wistaria blossoms, Natalie, or do you know?"

"Do I know? It's a bumblebee, simple!" Natalie answered scornfully. "Surely you've seen bumblebees before?"

"Well, this is the first one I've ever met socially," Nancy drawled. "Quite friendly

he seems, too. Will he bite, or can I keep him for a pet?"

"You try it!" Natalie began grimly, and then broke off to laugh. "You're — what is it they say in English books? You're spoofing me, Nancy."

"Guilty!" the younger girl admitted. "You're so sure we poor benighted city folks don't know anything about nature, and I was trying to live up to your ideas. Here's my last dish towel, Sis. Is that a neat hem or isn't it? I invite your approval of the dainty stitches."

Her sister examined it critically. "Well, dainty is not exactly the word I'd have chosen. However, I suppose it will do. It's only a dish towel, after all."

"I am overwhelmed by your extravagant praise!" Nancy rose, dropped the kitten into her sister's lap, and swept a deep curtsy. "Spare my blushes, sister mine — no more flattery, I prithee! Well, you can't say I didn't hem my share, anyway. Guess I'll help Pudge out a bit — maybe *he'll* appreciate me."

She stepped down from the porch and bent over the busy baby. He had abandoned his digging for the moment, and was earnestly

squeezing a great wad of clay between his plump fingers. "Make baw!" he confided, looking up into Nancy's face.

"Fine ball!" she applauded. "Nancy make, too?"

She sat down on the ground beside him, and scooped a handful of clay from the bottom of the hole. It was of a clear yellow color, and amazingly pliable. Nancy, whose kindergarten efforts in clay modeling had always brought praise from her teacher, became really interested. "This is good clay you find in China," she told Pudge. "I believe we can do something a little more ambitious than a ball, honey. Watch Nancy make a little tea set."

With deft fingers she began rounding out cups and plates. Pudge dropped his ball and hung over her, his rosy face aglow with interest. The older girls chatted on, and the shadows of late afternoon slanted across the pleasant picture.

Presently Natalie glanced at her wrist-watch and folded her sewing. "I must go; Mother will be needing me. I've only one more to do, Bernice; put it away for me, and I'll finish it

next time. Come on, Pudgie, you can carry kitty if you're very careful. Heavens, what have you done to yourself?"

The baby gleefully waved his arms, plastered to the elbows with yellow clay. "Help Nanny, make booful disses," he crowed. "*Booful* disses, all for Pudge."

Natalie followed his pointing finger. She picked up a gracefully shaped toy pitcher and examined it with real admiration. "Why, this is lovely, Nancy! I didn't know you did this sort of thing."

"I told you she was artistic," Bernice observed, coming to look. "They *are* nice, Nancy — wish I could do something like that."

"I love this teapot, too," Natalie went on. "And the darling cups! What's the matter with this big one? You forgot the handle, and it's all squeegeed!"

"It is not!" Nancy answered indignantly. "My cups are *never* squeegeed! Let me see. Oh!" she laughed. "That's a joke on you, Natalie. This isn't one of mine at all; it's the Egyptian cup Bubastis found for us. Sis put it there when Pudge finished his milk."

Natalie laughed, too. "My apologies! And

at that you rank a whole lot higher as a cup-maker than Pharaoh, or whoever did this one. They're almost exactly the same color, aren't they?" she went on. "That seems odd, when you come to think of it."

"Yes, it does." Nancy had taken the Egyptian cup from her and was scanning it with new interest. "This has been baked; that would darken it a little. Not kiln-fired, either, just baked in the sun or a hot oven. If I did that with mine, they ought to come out exactly the same shade. I wonder — it *is* odd," she finished perplexedly. "I don't see how the clay here in America could be the very same tint as Egyptian clay."

"I know something else that's odd," Bernice interrupted. "None of the other clay objects in the Egyptian Room is yellow. The Ali Baba jar is red, and several of the dishes. Some of the little statuettes are gray, and lots of them are so covered with bright paint you can hardly tell. But I'm quite sure there isn't another thing made of yellow clay."

"And that proves — what?" Natalie demanded.

"I can't imagine. Perhaps Great-Uncle

Peter broke the original cup, and imitated it in clay from his own yard? That would be a silly thing to do, though. He'd know that he couldn't hope to fool anybody; any experts, that is. They'd know right away that it was home-made. I can't see — it's just another mystery," she finished hopelessly.

"Looks that way," Natalie agreed. "Well, I must run. Is he to have the tea set, Nancy? How lovely. Say thank you, Pudge. Here, dear, sister will carry the dishes, and you take pussy. No, *not* by the tail!"

"Will you be over to-morrow?" Nancy asked eagerly.

"I surely will, and we'll put our heads together over this latest puzzle. As Alice said, things are getting mysteriouser and mysteriouser in this house!"

CHAPTER XVI

BESIDE THE BROOK

Natalie, cutting across the vacant lot as soon as her morning duties were done the next day, was surprised to hear her name called from an upper window. Looking up, she saw Nancy's hand waving between the iron bars by which the window was protected.

"We're in the Egyptian Room," she called. "Walk right in; the back door's open. Come on up."

A little breathless from climbing the stairs, Natalie found the two sisters waiting for her. "You really ought not to leave your doors open like that, you know, especially after the Ali adventure," she admonished.

Nancy laughed. "Your mother told me herself that nobody in Rosemont ever thought of locking his doors in the daytime," she replied. "We're just trying to fall in with the ways of the natives. We run in and out the back way

all day long, and it's a frightful nuisance to bother with keys."

"I think Ali was your town's only burglar," Bernice observed. "And the gypsies left the hollow the very day after your father warned him. I don't think we'll be burglarized again."

"Well, I don't really think so, either," Natalie agreed, tossing her red tam so that it fell upon the stone cat's head. "Look at your kitty, Nancy, doesn't he look cunning in that? I'm pretty sure we've seen the last of Ali," she pursued. "Father said he was just a coward. Willing to steal if he could get away with it, but without nerve enough to try it again after he'd been caught. He and his gypsy friends were going through Creston the other day, Father heard. They always go south when autumn comes, like the wild geese, and this time the scare Ali got has hurried them up. They won't show their faces around here again this year."

"Well, I'm glad of that," Nancy exclaimed. "I can still see that horrid old woman! I feel rather sorry for her, though, and the other gypsies, too. Ali made them step around and wait on him as if he were royalty. They'll wish

they'd never let him join the band before they're through."

"I guess so," Natalie agreed. "What are you two doing up here, anyway? I thought you might like to go after water-cress. There's a splendid bed down along the creek, where your gypsy friends were camped. Can't you come?"

"Love to," Bernice answered. "We came up just to make sure that I was right when I said none of Great-Uncle Peter's pottery was yellow, except the cup. I was right, too. You can see for yourself."

"I believe you," Natalie answered. "But for the life of me I can't see that it makes sense. I'll take it back, now, pussy." She gave the stone cat a careless pat as she transferred the red tam from his head to her own. "Do come along! You girls have hardly been outside the house since you came, and it's too nice a day to waste indoors. Bring a basket, Nancy."

The June day was perfect; hot, as had been most of the days since the sisters arrived in Rosemont, but with a pleasant breeze. The little brook, fed from a spring higher up, murmured sleepily over bright-hued pebbles, and

the willows which fringed it made cool green shade. The air was sweet with flowering elder bushes, and from the deeper woods beyond the brook came a chorus of bird song.

“There’s only one sensible way to gather water-cress, you know,” Natalie observed, sinking down on the grassy bank. “And that’s to take your shoes and stockings off and wade in.”

“Oh, I’ll love that!” Nancy exclaimed, flopping down beside her and tugging at a sandal buckle. “Are there water snakes, do you suppose? I’m fearfully afraid of water snakes.”

“I’ve never seen any,” Natalie answered cheerfully. “And I’ve been gathering water-cress here since I was the size of Pudge. The water’s icy, though; you must be prepared for that.”

Nancy squirmed along the bank until she could reach the water with her toe. “Ooh — I should say so! Well — first in!” She stood up, with the clear water swirling about her ankles. “And now where is this much-talked-of water-cress?”

Natalie joined her, and gave her shoulder an affectionate little pinch. “You’re standing

in the middle of it, darling! That green stuff growing out of the water all around you."

Nancy stooped and pulled a green spray. "Well, well, who'd a' thought it! And me always supposing it grew on platters, twined about a planked steak. Ain't nature wonderful!"

"Nancy, you idiot!" Bernice was wading in, with little shrieks at the coldness of the water. "Natalie will think you know even less of English grammar than you do of — of — is horticulture the word I want?"

"It's a good word, anyway; I'd take it," her sister answered placidly. "If you can't use it now, it's sure to come in handy some other time. Taste this stuff, Sis. It's great."

When their baskets were full, the three girls returned to the bank, extending their chilled feet to dry in the sun. Bernice and Natalie found tree-trunks to rest their backs against, but Nancy lay full length, her head pillow'd on her sister's lap. The sky was very blue above her; the little cottony clouds very white. Natalie's mother had said that the black-and-white kitten would surely be old enough to leave home in another week. This is really a

nice world, Nancy thought drowsily. When a girl has a lovely home, and a darling old Daddy, and a sister who only tries to be bossy, without really minding when she doesn't succeed — and who's rather a darling, too, though it would never do to tell her so — and a delightful understanding friend like Natalie — and a black-and-white kitten — yes, it's a pretty nice old world. It would be perfect, if only —

“ Natalie,” she broke the restful silence to say abruptly. “ You promised we’d put our heads together over the latest mystery; the Egyptian cup that doesn’t seem to be Egyptian after all. What do you think it’s all about? If Uncle Peter made the cup himself — and I’m almost sure he did, now — he must have had some reason for it. What *could* it have been? ”

“ I’m like Ali, I’m afraid,” replied Natalie. “ ‘ I not knowing.’ As Bernice said, it seems such a silly thing to do. And from all I know about Mr. Hallam, he wasn’t in the habit of doing silly things.”

“ Oh, but he was! ” Nancy retorted. “ Look how he quarreled with Lydia — that was silly!

And I suppose some people, Mr. Charlton, for instance, would think he was silly to buy the golden girdle at all. Mr. Charlton would have thought it much more sensible to put the ten thousand dollars into the bank and let it draw interest."

"If Uncle Peter had only done that!" Bernice sighed. "Then it would have come to Daddy, and ten thousand dollars would just about be the salvation of our family right now. I wish Ali had never told him about the golden girdle!"

"Bernice Enfield!" Nancy's tone expressed pure amazement. "And then we'd never have had all this mystery, and romance, and adventure! Why, it's been just like living in the most exciting book you ever read. I don't see how you can even bear to *think* of missing it all, much less *wish* to!"

"Oh, well, maybe I didn't quite mean that," Bernice admitted. "It has been thrilling; nothing like it ever happened to us before, or is ever likely to. But if we're going to have to stop off in the middle, and never know the answer — well, I just don't see the good of it. You can call me humdrum and practical if you

want to, but I'd rather have ten thousand dollars in real money than the promise of a golden girdle which maybe never existed, and which certainly can't be found."

"And that's *my* sister!" Nancy appealed to the other girl, who was listening with amusement. "After all the pains I've taken in bringing her up, too! Oh, well, who cares? There *is* a golden girdle, and it's somewhere in Hallam House. Great-Uncle Peter gave it to me, and I'm going to find it or my name's not Nancy!"

"Of course you are, darling," Natalie agreed quickly. "Some day, somehow, we're going to come across your uncle's 'clue', and it will lead us straight to the treasure. If he'd only given some hint, in his letter to Mr. Charlton! He did say he'd written down the directions, and concealed them where they could not be easily found. Why couldn't he have said a little more?"

"Well, he didn't trust Ali," Bernice observed. "He probably felt that the servant wasn't above opening the letter, so he didn't dare say too much. And of course he expected to see the lawyer next day, and tell him every-

thing. Your father thought we might find a paper hidden away somewhere in his room, Natalie, but we didn't, of course."

"I don't think he wrote the directions at the same time as the letter," Natalie answered. "Ali told us he hid the jewel about five years earlier, you remember. I think he prepared the directions then, as a precaution in case anything happened to him. He was a very old man, you know, and his health was failing a long time before this last illness."

"Poor Uncle Peter!" Bernice said wistfully. "I can't help feeling sorry for him, ending his days all alone in that great house he'd built to be so happy in. I do hope Ali wasn't unkind to him."

"Oh, he wasn't," Natalie assured her. "Dr. Fox told Mother that Ali made a splendid nurse, and that he did everything possible to make his master comfortable. He must have been a queer character — Ali, I mean. We know that he was dishonest, and selfish, and cowardly, yet he tended Mr. Hallam faithfully, even while he planned to rob him."

"Well, I think he was an honest-to-goodness villain, and you needn't go digging up things

about him for *me* to admire," Nancy said decisively. "Villains aren't supposed to have any good points, anyway; every one knows that."

"All right, we'll leave you your villain, Nancy girl," Natalie answered good-naturedly. "What were we discussing when we got off on Ali? Oh, yes. Where can Mr. Hallam have put his clue to the hiding-place of the golden girdle?"

"That wasn't what we began discussing," Bernice objected. "This conference started out to consider the why of the yellow cup."

"Girls, listen!" Nancy suddenly sat upright, her eyes blazing with a new idea. "We've agreed — well, almost agreed that Great-Uncle Peter made the yellow cup himself, from clay he found in his own yard. Now, suppose he *did* make it, and put it in the case among the real relics. We've said all along that there wouldn't be any sense in doing a thing like that unless he had a reason. I've just thought of a reason he might have had." She paused dramatically, and the older girls chorused, "Yes, go on!"

"Suppose the reason is this," Nancy continued slowly, enjoying every minute of the

sensation she was causing. “ Suppose he made the cup and put it there because — because the cup *is* the clue! ”

The interest in the faces of the other girls faded to disappointment. “ But it couldn’t be, honey,” Bernice pointed out gently. “ The letter to Mr. Charlton plainly said ‘ written directions ’.”

“ I haven’t forgotten that,” Nancy answered calmly. “ But it didn’t say ‘ written on paper ’, And — it didn’t say ‘ *written in English* ’! ”

“ Nancy! ” There was awed respect in Natalie’s voice. “ You mean — the carving on the cup? You think it might be a message? Why, I never thought of such a thing. You *are* clever, little one! ”

“ Written in Egyptian, or Greek, or whatever it is? ” Bernice supplied eagerly. “ Why, Nancy darling, it *could* be! But fancy your figuring that out! You’re right, Natalie, she *is* the cleverest, brightest — oh, give us a kiss, kiddie. I *am* proud of my wise little sister! ”

“ Of course, I may be wrong,” Nancy admitted, when the chorus of admiration died down. “ But the more I think of it, the more likely it seems. The cup was put there for

some purpose, and the clue is *somewhere*. Why shouldn't one mystery be the answer to the other?"

"Let's go back to the house," Bernice was pulling on her stockings in feverish haste. "I can't wait to look at the cup again."

"And I was right about Bubastis in the first place," Nancy crowed. "He *was* trying to tell us, the best he knew how. Oh, hurry, Natalie, do you *have* to lace all the holes? The dear old kitty — to think that I ever doubted him!"

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT CAN IT MEAN?

The little yellow cup sat quite at home among the other dishes in the kitchen cupboard, where Nancy had placed it after drying the breakfast dishes this morning. With hands that trembled from excitement she brought it down, and carried it out to the other two who had dropped upon the old wooden bench on the back porch.

The three girls passed it from hand to hand, trying to read a meaning into the deep scratches which ran all around the upper edge. Then they looked at each other blankly.

“I’m still in the dark,” Natalie ventured. “Whether it was written by Pharaoh or your Great-Uncle Peter, it still doesn’t mean a thing to me.”

Nancy laughed ruefully. “Do you know, I somehow expected the message to leap right out at us, now that we feel certain it *is* a message. Just another disappointment.”

“But of course we’ll have to get it translated,” Bernice said sensibly. “Don’t look so worried, dearest, we’ll find a way. Do you know of any Egyptian scholars here in town, Natalie?”

Natalie shook her head. “I’m sure there’s no one,” she replied. “That’s why Mr. Hallam was considered so queer; that he’d spend all his time and money on a study that nobody else ever heard of.”

Nancy looked up. “You said something before about looking it up in Great-Uncle Peter’s library. Don’t you suppose we could do that? He must have hundreds of books in there, and most of them seem to be about Egypt.”

Natalie sprang to her feet. “Of course! I’d forgotten all about the library. Let’s go and look right now.”

In the search for the Girdle of Isis, the two fathers had removed all the books from the shelves. They had even shaken the pages, hoping that Great-Uncle Peter’s written directions might flutter out. Nothing had come to light, however, and the only benefit of the

library search had been that Bernice had given the books a sadly needed dusting before they were put back on the shelves.

The three stood now a little helplessly before the rows of solid volumes, Nancy cuddling the yellow cup in both hands. It was difficult to know which of the books to choose, and the girls scanned the titles with frowning brows. Finally Bernice's eyes alighted on one which seemed promising. "The Glory of the Pharaohs," she read, and carried it eagerly to the big walnut table in the center of the room.

The book was plentifully illustrated with views of the pyramids, the sphinx, and frowning kings in queer headdresses. There were photographs of tombs, too, and of mummy cases, these last covered with what was undoubtedly writing, but so small in the picture that they could make nothing of it.

Natalie's selection was better. It showed several "cartouches," or oblong figures containing the names of kings. None of these in the least resembled the letters on the cup. Hopefully they turned to another book; Nancy's choice, this time.

There were several copies of inscriptions in

this book, taken from tomb walls, and enlarged so that they were quite clear. Nancy puzzled over them in growing bewilderment. "They aren't writing at all; they're pictures," she complained. "You can make out the bird quite plainly — see, he comes in over and over. And there's a fish, and something that looks like a can-opener. Did the Egyptians have can-openers, Sis?"

"I shouldn't think so," Bernice answered vaguely. She had been bending to look where Nancy pointed, and now straightened herself with a sigh. "I was sure the inscription on the cup couldn't be hieroglyphics, honey; I told you that when we found it. We'll have to look farther."

"Oh, here's the Rosetta stone!" Natalie had been ruffling the pages. "This is the same picture we had in our history. Look at it, Bernice, it's your specialty. Which inscription is which? It's so faint I can't tell."

Bernice frowned at the page. "I can't tell, either, from this. It's all just a blur. I wish we could find some plain Greek writing to compare with the letters on the cup; they look more likely to be that than anything

else, to me. Let's try something else."

They pulled out book after book, without any result, until their shoulders ached from handling the heavy volumes. It was Nancy who found at last, tucked away in the lowest shelf, a thin little black book which had gone unnoticed. The title had worn off the cover, and it showed signs of much use. She opened it to the title page, and read aloud, "A Layman's Guide to the Interpretation of Historical Records."

"Does that sound like anything?" she asked doubtfully. "I don't know exactly what a layman is, but I shouldn't be surprised if we were three of him. Anyway, we *do* need a guide, so let's have a look."

Three heads bent over the book, as Nancy spread it open on the table. Unlike the others they had examined, which were scientific works full of long words, this book was written in simple language. It was printed in large, clear type, and had many pictures.

The first chapter told how writing began, with the cavemen scratching rude pictures on the walls of their caves. "This looks interesting; I'm going to read it some day," Nancy

announced. "But not now. I'm too anxious to find what we're looking for."

She skipped to another chapter, this one dealing with Egypt. Here was the Rosetta stone again, with its history briefly told.

Nancy hastily skimmed the printed page, then looked up with a smile. "I wanted to see if you were bluffing when you told us all about it the other day, Sis," she admitted. "I'll have to send you to the head of the class, though; you told it exactly as it is here, only you made it lots more interesting. Here's a lot about the common writing, the demotic. I suppose to people like us it would have been the really important one, wouldn't it? Let's see. 'Developed from the hieroglyphics, as a sort of running hand' — 'used in business reports and keeping accounts' — Well, that's not very helpful. What we want is to see some. Oh!" she turned the page. "Here's the will of an Egyptian gentleman who died about thirty centuries ago. It's written in demotic, and there's a whole page of it. And it's not — no, it's not a bit like the cup-writing. Do you think so, Natalie?"

Natalie examined the page carefully, and

shook her head. "Well, at least we know the writing on the cup is neither form of Egyptian script; that's something. What comes next?"

Nancy turned a few pages. "Cuneiform or nail-writing of the Sumerians," she read. "This looks a little like it," she began hopefully.

"It does, doesn't it?" Bernice peered anxiously over her shoulder. "What does it say? 'Engraved on tablets of clay' — well, that *is* promising. Find some more examples, quick!"

Long and anxiously they studied the pictures. There was a slight resemblance to the inscription on the cup, but so very slight that they were forced at last to conclude that they were on the wrong track. A little dispiritedly, Nancy turned the pages to the chapter on Greece.

This was easier, for the Greek alphabet was given. Though some of the cup's characters were similar, none was near enough to be taken for a Greek letter, either ancient or modern.

Hurriedly they ran through the book. Hebrew, Sanskrit, Arabic, it was the same tale. When, with a sigh, Nancy closed the volume,

they were sure of only one thing. The inscription on the yellow cup was not in any language they could identify.

“ Well, so that’s that,” Nancy said, in such a woebegone little voice that her sister passed a comforting arm around her.

“ Don’t you mind, darling,” she said quickly. “ We’ve made splendid progress to-day, even if we haven’t solved the riddle yet. Only this morning we were wondering why Great-Uncle Peter made the cup, and where he had hidden his clue. Thanks to your quick wits, we’ve found the answers to those questions, and we’ll find the answer to this one, too. Don’t you worry!”

“ I won’t, then,” Nancy gave her arm an affectionate little squeeze, and smiled very brightly to show she had never thought of crying. “ We’ll come to the end of these mysteries yet, *I know it!*”

“ I’m going to take this book along,” she added, as the three of them passed through the library door. “ It looks like fascinating reading. And maybe there’s something in it that will give us a hint yet. You never can tell!”

CHAPTER XVIII

SUNDAY

The next day was Sunday, their second at Hallam House. The first one had passed almost unnoticed in the flurry of getting settled. This was to be a pleasant leisurely day, with Sunday School in the morning, for Natalie was eager to introduce the girls to her other Rosemont friends. Then they were all to go to dinner at the Clarke home. Mr. Enfield and the sheriff had grown quite friendly since the night Natalie so unexpectedly brought them together. And motherly Mrs. Clarke had been very sweet to her daughter's new chums.

"You have to come to the small towns to know what 'neighbor' really means," Bernice remarked at the breakfast table. "We haven't been here two weeks yet, and already we know the Clarkes better than we did the people who lived across the hall from us for years, in Chicago. And I do think they're the nicest family — the Clarkes, I mean. Don't you, Dad?"

"Indeed, I do," Mr. Enfield answered. "No, no more toast, thank you, dear. I'm not very hungry this morning."

He picked up the Sunday paper, and Bernice studied him across the table with anxious eyes. She had said nothing to Nancy, but she was beginning to be worried about Daddy. He was unusually silent these days, and when she spoke to him his thoughts seemed a thousand miles away. Without asking, she knew that the book was not going well. The waste-paper basket she emptied every morning was heaped high with torn and discarded pages. Only to-day she had peeped at his typewriter, and noticed a clean new page headed, "Chapter One," in the machine. That meant that he had thrown away his earlier efforts and was starting all over. Nearly two weeks of their precious summer had already gone, and there was very little done on the Book!

Once, when Daddy talked to her about the book, before they left Chicago, he had told her gayly that he meant to work on a strict schedule. Twelve weeks, twenty-four chapters. That meant two chapters a week. "Rain or shine, if I have to sit up all night to do it!" he had

vowed. That was easier said than done, she realized now. Great books didn't grow that way, as poor Daddy was finding out. If only he didn't have that feeling of being hurried, of racing against time! Probably that was the whole trouble, the reason his first chapter wouldn't come right.

Bernice's forehead wrinkled in deep anxiety. She knew exactly what they had to live on. And economize as she would, and plan and contrive, it would just barely see them to the end of the summer. To September first, say. And this was — yes, it really was June eighteenth. If the book wasn't finished by September first — and at this rate it couldn't be! — then when that date came Daddy would have to go back to the newspaper; give up his dreams of authorship and take up the burden of breadwinning for the three of them again. Oh, she couldn't bear that; she just couldn't! Bernice didn't want wealth; she and Nancy were perfectly satisfied and happy with simple clothes and plain food and everyday living. But if only they could have a little money, enough to keep the family going and let Daddy do the work he wanted to do; enough to make them safe

until the girls were old enough to do their share! If only—

“It’s quite a problem,” Nancy’s clear voice broke in on her musings. “Do I wear the ruffled taffeta and awe the simple villagers with my city elegance, or would it be kinder to appear in last year’s dotted Swiss and put them at their ease?”

“Goose!” Bernice dismissed her worries for the time being. “I suppose you think the Rosemont girls go to church in sunbonnets and gingham aprons? That shows you haven’t noticed the store-windows in this town. The shops are small, but they’re showing the same styles you’d see on State Street, darling. You’ll wear your very best, and so shall I. We want to be a credit to Natalie.”

“You know, I think you’re getting to be a regular Rosemonter,” Nancy remarked. “You’re developing the ‘booster spirit’ the *Rosemont Times* talks so much about. Poor old Chicago would be in a bad way if it didn’t have me to stick up for it. Heigh-ho, must we do the dishes? No, don’t speak, I know the answer. Let’s hurry, though. Natalie promised to be here by ten.”

The walk of several blocks to the old gray stone church was a very pleasant one; the girls of Natalie's class received them with warm friendliness. Nancy's secret conviction that small-town people — except Natalie, of course — were all old-fashioned and behind the times, received a severe shock. In their tasteful, pretty dresses, these girls could not be distinguished from any city group; they were certainly as well-bred and well-informed as any girls she knew at home.

“I’m beginning to lose my faith in the movies!” she whispered to Bernice, when Natalie left them for a minute to speak to her Camp Fire guardian. She was very glad now that she had worn the peach-colored taffeta, especially when Natalie presented them to the guardian, a very charming University girl. It was arranged then and there that the two Enfield girls were to join the Camp Fire group, and they chattered excitedly all the way to Natalie’s home, of “honors” and “ranks” and council fires and hikes.

Natalie was especially enthusiastic about the winter sports of the group. “Just wait till we get the first snowfall — that’s when our fun

really begins. You'll love it!" she predicted.

A shadow fell across Bernice's face. "I'm afraid we'll not be here for that, Natalie. We'll probably be going back to Chicago again when fall comes."

"Why, Bernice!" Natalie stared. "Surely you can't mean that? Why, I've been making all sorts of plans for this winter! We have a splendid High here, and you'd be in my class — you'd just love the teachers and the girls. You haven't had much chance to get acquainted yet, but surely you can't want to go back to that crowded, stuffy city. I thought you *liked* Rosemont."

Brave Bernice blinked back a tear. "Of course I like it, and I'd love to stay — to live here for always. But it's just — you know, I told you the other night, Natalie. About the money, and — and everything."

"I'd forgotten!" Contrite, Natalie hugged her friend to her. "It just seemed so awful, the thought of losing you two, that I forgot everything. And I'm not going to believe it, that you won't be able to stay here. Some way, it's all going to come right. It's got to."

Little Nancy had said nothing, but to her

surprise she found that the very thought of leaving Rosemont was like a heavy weight rolled across her heart. All the "ifs" connected with Daddy's book had meant little to her; and she had taken it for granted that Hallam House was their home, and her sense of being only a "city visitor" was already wearing thin. She knew quite definitely, now, that like Bernice she had no wish to return to the city. Life in this pleasant country village was sweeter and gayer than she had ever found it, and she was passionately sure that she could never again be happy anywhere else.

But trouble never troubled Nancy for long. Good old Sis was always worrying over something. She wanted to stay, Nancy wanted to stay — as Daddy always said, they'd manage, somehow. She slipped her hand into Bernice's and light-heartedly echoed Natalie's last words, "It'll all come right, Sis. It's got to!"

They found Daddy and Mr. Clarke smoking lazily on the front veranda, while Mrs. Clarke bustled about the kitchen, followed at every step by little Pudge. Natalie's mother assured them that she needed no help, and the girls drifted off to visit the kittens, taking the baby with them.

After the delicious dinner, Mr. Clarke got out his car and took them for a long drive. They left the tree-shaded streets of the little town for winding country roads, and the two girls returned at nightfall tired and happy, with their arms loaded with wild flowers.

“It’s been a lovely day, I think,” Nancy said as they undressed that night. “Didn’t you just enjoy every minute of it, Sis?”

For a moment Bernice’s anxieties of the morning came back to her. “I think it was good for Daddy, getting completely away from his book for a little while,” she murmured. “Didn’t you think he looked more rested, to-night?”

“Daddy? Why, I didn’t notice; he looks all right,” Nancy replied. “Didn’t you think it was a lovely day, Bernice,” she persisted. “Wasn’t it just one of the nicest days you ever lived in your whole life?”

Bernice considered. “Yes, it really was. The Clarkes are so nice, and the girls were lovely, and that darling Miss Rose — yes, it was a beautiful day.” But to herself she added, with a little sigh, “Oh, if only —”

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE TREE-TOP

“ You’re sure there’s nothing you want me for, Sis? ”

It was mid-morning. The breakfast dishes were washed and put away, beds were made and dusting done. Over a week had passed since the happy Sunday the girls had spent with Natalie’s family. They had attended a Council Fire and been taken into the Camp Fire group, and several of the girls they met had called on them. There had been a picnic, too, and excited plans were afoot for an overnight camping trip in the near future.

In all this rush of pleasant excitement Nancy had found little time to ponder the secret of the lost Girdle of Isis. But this morning, though Natalie was coming soon for another sewing session, Nancy had a sudden fancy to go off by herself and study the book she had brought from Great-Uncle Peter’s library. She had meant to do it all along, but so many

other things had come up that she had never found the time.

"No, I don't need you at all, honey," Bernice replied. "You finished your share of the towels long ago. What's on your mind?"

"Well, I thought I'd climb that old apple-tree in the back yard and do a little reading," Nancy answered. "I've always wanted to read in the branches of a tree — so many of my favorite heroines do it that it must be fun. I'm taking along a little nourishment so I won't feel faint," she added, stuffing a rosy apple into the pocket of her yellow chambray smock. "Let's see; a few of your justly-celebrated oatmeal cookies would help, too. And crackers. Have we any of those little ones with cheese inside? I do love those. Oh, thanks, I'll take the box, I think, just in case."

"In case you don't come down again for a week?" her sister inquired. "You've got enough food there to keep you going until the Fourth of July, I should say."

"Mere crumbs!" Nancy answered airily. "What I really need is a banana. What, no bananas? A fine household this is. Well, I'll try to keep soul and body together as best I

can. 'By, Sis. Natalie's staying for luncheon, of course? Tell her I'll see her then."

"Oh, you're coming down for luncheon?" her sister inquired innocently.

"Naturally. Be sure and have plenty, won't you, for I'll be starved!" Nancy laughed. She gathered up her supplies, not forgetting the little black book, kissed her sister hastily, and fled.

It was like being in a little green house, up there in the apple-tree. Nancy felt very pleased with her success in climbing; she had never attempted it before, and had been a little afraid it might prove harder than it looked. But with no trouble at all she had hoisted herself to a perch on a thick limb that grew as though its aim in life were to resemble an arm-chair. It was true that small twigs had caught at her floating curls and given them many a painful yank in the ascent, but that was nothing. She had very wisely placed her food and the book in a tin pail with a handle, which she carried over her arm to leave both hands free for grasping the limbs. Next time she would bring a cushion, and the retreat would be perfect.

She settled herself on the limb, with her back against the trunk and her feet comfortably braced on a lower bough. The pail hung in easy reach at her elbow. This was fun! The leaves were so thick that the sun scarcely touched her, and when the breeze rustled them they sang a little whispering song. It was very quiet up there, except for the singing leaves and the birds twittering in the near-by trees. In a mood of serene content, Nancy spread the book open on her knees, and took the first huge bite from the spicy apple.

She had been quick to notice that this book, alone of the ones they examined, seemed to have been much read. Nancy had a shrewd suspicion that poor Great-Uncle Peter, with all his curious passion for Egyptian things, had found the scholarly writings of the authorities a little difficult. Since many of the objects in his collection were covered with hieroglyphics, it was probable that he had found this book useful in his attempts to puzzle out their meanings. And if he had tried his own hand at composing an inscription, as the little yellow cup seemed to indicate, this would have been the likeliest book to help him out.

She skimmed through the pages again, hoping to find an example of the queer letters on the cup; a drawing they had overlooked in their first hasty search. Nothing of the kind rewarded her, however, and with a grim determination not to give up, she turned to the first page and began to read the printed matter with grave attention.

She learned a great deal that was new to her, and much that was surprising. She had never realized before that men and women lived, and worked, and played, for centuries before the art of writing was invented. That all history up to our own time is merely a matter of records, and that all we can know of long-dead peoples is what they had the wit to set down in pictures or signs.

The apple disappeared bite by bite, followed by the oatmeal cookies and most of the cheese biscuits. The sun, high overhead now, threw dainty leaf patterns on the pages. Nancy was so absorbed in the book itself that she almost forgot her purpose in reading it; to find a clue to Great-Uncle Peter's 'clue.'

"Ciphers and Cryptograms." She had come to the last chapter of all now, or rather an ap-

pendix after the last chapter. The author was speaking of the hundreds of systems of "secret writings" employed by peoples of all historical periods. Sometimes a prisoner wished to communicate with his friends; sometimes in war it was necessary to send a message which would tell nothing to the enemy, should it fall into their hands. There were no pictures in this part of the book, and only a few pages of close print.

Nancy stirred restlessly, and realized for the first time that her apple-tree armchair left something to be desired in the way of softness. Her attention wandered from the book, and she parted the branches to peer toward the house. She dimly remembered having heard the voices of Bernice and Natalie as they sewed on the back porch, but the bench was empty now. They must have gone inside to prepare luncheon. "Well, I'm almost through; I might as well finish this chapter and be done with it," she decided. "They'll call me when lunch is ready."

She turned back to the book, but the spell was broken now. She remembered that she was reading, not for amusement, but for a purpose,

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and a purpose that it seemed was not going to be accomplished. Nancy's spirits, which were always either very high or very low, began to sink. It seemed as though the secret of Hallam House might remain a secret forever; that her golden girdle must remain but a splendid dream. Oh, well, she'd go on with the book, and try not to be too disappointed when it told her nothing.

Patiently she ploughed through the first two pages of the last chapter. After explaining briefly the purpose of secret codes, the author gave several historical instances in which they had played their part.

“It may be helpful,” he went on, “to analyze a typical cryptogram. We will take the famous Rosicrucian Square, so called from its employment by the mysterious Brotherhood of the Rose Cross during the Middle Ages. Variations of this code are infinite, and have been used from ancient times. It played a significant part in the siege of Paris, during the Franco-Prussian War.

Reduced to its simplest form, the principle is as follows:”

Nancy turned the page, and gave an uncontrollable little start. For in the white mar-

gin beside the printed column a light pencil line ran from the top of the page to the bottom. Did that mean — oh, could it mean that Uncle Peter had marked this passage with his own hand?

“Now don’t be silly!” she admonished herself. “All you’ve done since this thing started has been to go on wild-goose chases. You’ve had one brilliant idea after another, and all of them were going to solve the mystery in just a minute. Yes, and what came of them? They simply led you into other mysteries that got worse and worse. Steady, now, Nancy; don’t lose your head this time.”

In spite of her words, her fingers were trembling so with excitement that she could scarcely read the book.

“Lay off two horizontal line-segments of equal length and equi-distant,” the book continued. “Let them be intersected at right angles by two equal vertical lines, also equi-distant. Construct two similar figures. Place —”

“Nancee!” called Bernice’s voice. “Are you coming? If you don’t want lunch say so. This is the last call!”

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“Sorry, I didn’t hear you,” Nancy shouted. “I’m on my way.” She closed the book with a frown of perplexity, dropped it into the now empty pail, and began the downward scramble.

CHAPTER XX

LIGHT AT LAST

“ You two have had geometry, haven’t you? ” Nancy asked, when, washed and brushed, she took her place at the luncheon table.

“ It’s my specialty,” Bernice answered promptly. “ Didn’t I show you those four S’s in a row I got last term, duckie? Why ask such a silly question of me? ”

“ Well, you just called it ‘ math ’,” Nancy apologized. “ I wasn’t sure whether it was geometry or algebra. Sis got awfully collegiate as soon as they let her in high school — half the time you can’t tell what she’s talking about,” she explained to Natalie. “ I suppose you’ve had it, too? ”

“ Yes, but I’m not any too good at it,” Natalie admitted. “ Literature is more my line. Why? Are you taking up higher mathematics in your spare moments? ”

Bernice had been studying her sister’s face. “ Nancy has an idea,” she announced. “ I can

always tell when her eyes shine like that. Haven't you, kitten? Come on, tell us all about it. What have you discovered now, and where in the world does geometry come in?"

"Well, I *have* thought of something," Nancy confessed. "But it's—oh, I don't know, so many of my ideas have gone wrong lately that I'm afraid to trust this one. Let's eat first, and then I'll tell you all about it. I'm starving!"

"You must be!" her sister agreed, and turned to Natalie with a laughing account of Nancy's lavish provisioning for the apple-tree expedition.

When the meal was over Nancy brought pencil and paper. "Now remember, there may not be anything in this at all," she warned. "I'm afraid to think there is, so I'm trying hard to tell myself it's just a bit of foolishness. But I do want to try something, and I need some help. Will you promise not to laugh at me if it doesn't work out?"

"Of course we won't laugh, honey," her sister assured her. "But tell us just one thing before we begin. *Is* it about the golden girdle?"

“I—think so,” Nancy answered slowly. “But remember, you mustn’t count on it. It’s just — well, just a sort of notion I have that Great-Uncle Peter’s message may be a cryptogram. And possibly — just possibly! — employing the Rosicrucian Square.”

“Mercy!” Natalie was plainly impressed. “We *have* been improving our mind in the apple-tree, haven’t we? Do hurry and tell us; I’m all excitement!”

“Don’t hurry her, Natalie,” Bernice warned. “She’s excited enough herself, though she’s pretending to be so calm. What do you want us to do, dear? Is it a problem to work?”

“Something like that,” Nancy replied. “At least, it sounds to me like something out of a schoolbook. I don’t know what half the words mean, myself, but I thought you would.”

“It’s the book we found in the library, isn’t it?” Bernice asked curiously as Nancy opened to the page where the pencil mark showed. “The one about ancient writings?”

Nancy nodded, and held the page so they could see the mark. “I thought — if Great-Uncle Peter marked it here — and if he was interested in secret writing — why, it might

mean something," she explained breathlessly.

"Let me see." Bernice took the book and began to read the marked passage. At the end of the first paragraph she broke off. "I don't think I quite get the idea. What's all this supposed to be, anyway?"

As best she could, Nancy explained what a cryptogram is. "These are directions for making one," she continued. "It's a very famous code, called the Rosicrucian Square. I thought we'd take paper and pencil and follow it step by step; just do each thing as it says. Maybe it will be clearer that way."

"Fine!" Bernice agreed. "Tell you what, you hold the book and read me a sentence at a time, and I'll try to follow directions. Natalie will help me out if I go wrong. Wait, I'll need a ruler, too. There's one in the kitchen-table drawer over there, Natalie, will you hand it to me? Thanks. All right, chicken. Ready!"

"Lay off two horizontal line-segments of equal length —" Nancy began, in a clear small voice which she could not stop from shaking a little. Natalie hung over Bernice's shoulder, watching the flying pencil.

"Well, there are your three similar figures,"

Bernice announced a few minutes later, and held up the paper for Nancy's inspection.

"Those?" Nancy stared at them in amazement. "Why, they're nothing in the world but the things we make for tit-tat-toe! Why couldn't he *say* what he meant, without dragging in all those line segments and equidistants and everything? He must be dumb!"

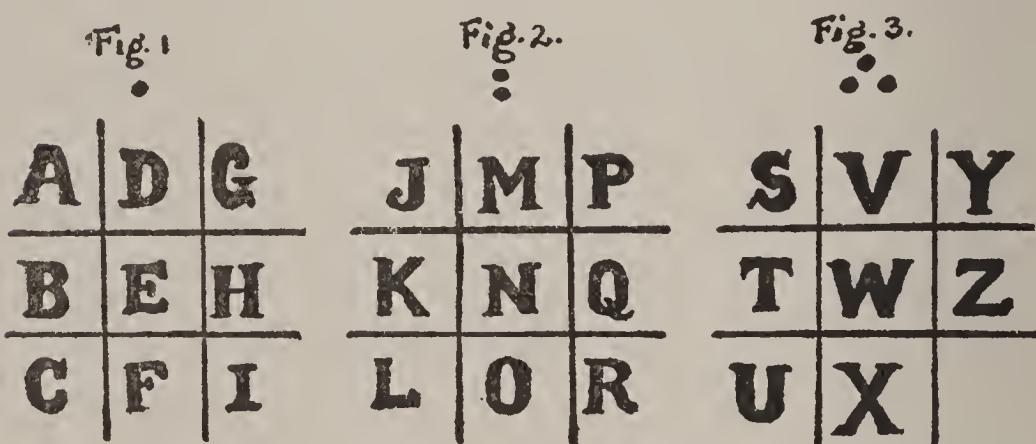
"Maybe he never played tit-tat-toe," Bernice suggested. "Judging from his book, he must have been a model boy in school, who put all his time on his history lessons and wasted none of it in idle games. But never mind the professor's habits. What does he want us to do next?"

Nancy turned back to the book. "Let's see, here it is. 'Place a dot above Fig. 1, two dots above Fig. 2, and three dots above Fig. 3. Now insert the letters of the alphabet in the squares and uncompleted squares of the figures, beginning at the upper left hand corner and running vertically in order. This completes the Rosicrucian Squares, and constitutes the key by which any message may be compiled or deciphered.'"

"So those are Rosicrucian Squares!" Nata-

lie murmured, when Bernice had painstakingly followed the instructions. "I must be very dense, for I still don't see what the professor is getting at."

Bernice's paper now looked like this:



"Next step, honey," she demanded impatiently.

"Let us suppose we wish to convey the message, 'I am young.'" Nancy read on.

"(That's something to send a secret letter about, (now isn't it?) For the letter **I** we would take the inverted right angle from the first square, occupied by that letter. A single dot indicates that the angle was taken from Fig. 1. For **A**, we would take the **A** angle, placing one dot within it also. **M** would be represented by the uncompleted square assigned to that letter in the second figure of the key, with two dots to

mark its position. And so on to the end of the message.' ”

“ I see it now! ” Bernice’s pencil was flying and Nancy and Natalie bent over her shoulder to watch as the queer characters took shape.

F J ☐ L ☐ ☐
I AM YOUNG

“ There! ” she ended breathlessly. “ ‘ I am young ’ — why, it’s perfectly simple! ”

Nancy scanned the paper a moment, and then raised solemn eyes to her sister. “ It is, isn’t it — like the writing on the cup? ” she asked.

“ Not a doubt of it! ” Bernice responded warmly. “ Darling, you’ve done it this time! Get the cup.”

With the three-square key before them, the girls set about eagerly turning the cup’s message into English. There was an unusually large space between two of the characters, and they decided that this must be the beginning, and the first character to the right would be the first letter of the sentence. It proved to be an *I*, which had also been the first letter of the

practice sentence, "I am young." The second one, "N, of course!" Nancy and Natalie cried together. The code was childishly simple, now that they knew the writer had merely taken the spaces where the letters stood on the key, and used their outlines instead of the letters themselves.

Bernice carefully printed each letter as they made it out, and in a very little time it lay clear before them.


IN THE CLAWS OF THE CAT

"In the Claws of the Cat — that was where Great-Uncle Peter hid the Girdle of Isis!" Nancy cried triumphantly. "We've solved it at last, and found the hiding-place that was too much for Ali, and for our fathers and Mr. Charlton! Oh, girls, isn't it just too wonderful? And didn't I always tell you we'd find it some day?"

"But we haven't found it yet," Bernice said mildly. "In the claws of the cat. What cat?"

"Why, Bubastis, of course!" Nancy retorted confidently. "What other cat could it be? There's never been another one on the

premises that I know of, except the black-and-white kitten. Of course it's Bubastis! Oh, do come quick, and let's go see. *I know* we've got it this time!"

With flying steps the three girls raced up the stairs and down the corridor to the Egyptian Room.

CHAPTER XXI

THE GIRDLE OF ISIS

The stone cat, Bubastis, sat very calmly on his pedestal, his unwinking stare fixed as always on the corner cupboard which had held the little yellow cup. Nancy threw her arms about his neck. "You were trying to tell us the secret all the time, O wisest of cats! Bless your stone heart, you *are* nice!"

"'In the Claws of the Cat,'" Bernice repeated thoughtfully. Her heart was beating so loudly that she thought the other girls must surely hear it. To little Nancy, the quest of the golden girdle had been an exciting game, a page lived from a romantic story. But to practical Bernice, never quite free from money-worry, the treasure stood for blessed relief, for a solving of all the problems that so vexed her adored Daddy. It couldn't be true, she told herself now. It was simply too wonderful to believe that they were on the verge of finding

the treasure; it was too much like a delightful dream from which one must surely awaken.

From the very first, Bernice had been afraid to let herself believe that the jewel really existed, and that they would yet find it. She had consoled Nancy's disappointment when their previous efforts had ended in failure; she must be ready to do the same thing again when this one failed also. "Such things don't happen!" she reminded herself now. "They can't — it's too like a fairy story!" But deep down, under her brave attempts to prepare against disappointment, her anxious heart was repeating prayerfully, "Oh, but if only — if only —"

"Well, he's certainly got claws, all right," Nancy was kneeling in front of the stone figure. "Look, girls, how cunningly they are carved. Four on each foot, curving out between his toes. They must be as big as a tiger's — mercy, I think I'm glad he isn't real, after all! Though I don't suppose for one minute he'd hurt me, friendly as we've been."

Bernice and Natalie knelt beside her, and all three closely scanned the feet of the image.

As they had noticed before, the stone paws rested on what was evidently meant to be a roll

of papyrus, the paper of early Egypt. The cat's paws were as large as Nancy's hands, and were curved around the scroll so as almost to encircle it. They were carved with careful attention to detail, and the toes were spread apart to show the claws as a cat's feet look when she is clutching something.

The scroll itself was beautifully carved. Each end showed circles within each other, as though a long sheet of paper had been tightly rolled. In front, there was a space of about four inches between the encircling paws, and this space was carved in a ridge to resemble the lower end of the rolled paper. A stone seal, marked with worn lines to represent the scarab, or sacred beetle, appeared to hold the rolled page in place. The workmanship was excellent, and it was plain that the ancient sculptor had lavished endless pains on his task.

"Well, and what do we do now?" Natalie asked briskly. "Here are the claws. Does he mean that the treasure is inside of them? Do we have to get a hammer and smash them to find it? I'm not sure we could. That stone looks terribly hard to me."

"Indeed you're not going to smash Bubastis'

toes with any hammer!" Nancy exclaimed indignantly.

"I don't think Great-Uncle Peter's 'in' meant literally inside the claws," Bernice offered. "It seems to me more likely that he used it in the sense of 'within.' 'Within' the claws — that could mean 'between the claws,' just as well. Not that it gets us any farther," she added honestly.

"Well, if you're thinking up meanings for the word, how about this one?" Nancy demanded. "*In* the claws of the cat — that is, make them go in. Oh, I know in that case he might have said 'Push in the claws,' but he was trying to make it hard, wasn't he? And all the stories I've ever read about secret hiding-places had something to press; a hidden spring that worked only when you pushed something in. Couldn't that be it?"

"Of course it could!" Natalie approved. "I was silly to think we'd have to break the stone. The figure was carved ages before your uncle ever saw it; he couldn't have made the hiding-place himself. It must have been there all the time, and if there's a way in, there's a way out."

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“Daddy thought the cat must have been used to guard the door of the king’s strong-room,” Bernice remembered. “And it’s very likely the king might think of fooling the thieves by hiding his most precious possession in the cat itself, where they’d never think of looking if they were trying to break into the room.”

“It will be quite all right for you two to sit here all day and discuss ancient history,” Nancy said politely. “Me, I’m going to see if I can’t push in kitty’s claws and find the Golden Girdle of Isis!”

“We’re waiting for you, dear,” Bernice answered gently. “You’ve made all the discoveries, done all the bright thinking that will solve the secret, if it’s to be solved. And—Great-Uncle Peter wanted you to have the girdle. We’ll watch, and help if you need us. But it’s your right to make the last discovery, and no one else’s.”

“I think so, too,” Natalie agreed gravely. Tears of affection sprang to Nancy’s eyes, and she threw both arms about her sister and her friend. “I do love you both!” she said brokenly. “And I’ve been so horrid some-

times, and you've been so sweet — oh, I just can't bear it if I've let you in for another disappointment this time!"

She laid her forefinger on one of the stone claws, and then hastily snatched it back. "If — if it doesn't work I'm not going to mind a bit," she said defiantly.

"Of course you're not!" her sister reassured her. "If we never find the golden girdle the sun will still rise and set, and the Enfield family will go on living. Try not to set your heart on it too much, dearest; everything will be all right."

"Oh, do go on!" Natalie urged, her hands clenched with eagerness. "If it isn't there, we'll think up a lot of consoling things to say. But do let's wait till we're sure we need them!"

"Well, here goes!" Nancy drew a long breath, and her heart-shaped little face was very solemn. The two older girls sat back on the floor on each side of her, and waited. Almost fearfully Nancy put out her hand, and then pressed her pink finger firmly on the first claw of the left foot.

"No good," she whispered tensely. "Try the next."

Slowly, pressing with all her strength, she tried each claw. The carven stone stubbornly resisted her fingers; nothing moved.

“Why don’t you —” Natalie began, but Bernice hushed her. “Let her do it her own way,” she whispered.

Again Nancy went over the claws, one by one, with the same result. She sat back on her heels then, her head a little on one side, thinking earnestly. Her lips moved without sound. “*In the claws of the cat — in the claws of the cat!* Not claw, claws. And in — they *must* go in, it can’t mean anything else. *In the claws of the cat — oh, I wonder?* But of course, how stupid of me! It has to be that!”

She flashed an eager glance at her sister, who gave her back a beautiful smile of love, and encouragement, and understanding.

“Now!” Nancy whispered. She bent forward, placing each finger carefully on one of the widespread claws. Eight claws, eight fingers, square on the tops of them.

“*In the Claws —*” she murmured, and with the words she pushed forcefully with both hands.

Could it be — was it only imagination? For

as she pushed, it surely seemed that the hard stone was sinking; slowly, slowly sinking beneath her eager fingers.

This was not imagination, at least. A curious whirring noise, rather like a clock about to strike, was coming from the papyrus scroll beneath the paws.

The claws *were* sinking, there could be no doubt of it now, for Nancy's knuckles were disappearing, each in a narrow little hole of its own. And the noise was growing louder, and was mingled with little squeakings and gratings.

Bernice and Natalie were close beside her, breathing heavily, with flushed faces, but Nancy had forgotten them. For as she watched, fascinated, and all the time continuing to press with all her might, the carved ridge which represented the end of the papyrus scroll was moving — parting — widening to a tiny crack which was steadily growing larger under her astounded eyes.

It seemed hours that the three girls crouched there, watching, and far too awed to speak. Although the ancient mechanism worked with agonizing slowness, it can scarcely have been

more than two minutes at most when with a little gurgling sigh the whirring ceased, and the stone claws came to rest in their dark holes out of sight in the ends of the scroll.

The crack between the paws was perhaps two inches wide, each side having slid down in its hidden groove. In the opening thus disclosed appeared a thick wad of ordinary absorbent cotton, dusty and discolored.

Nancy withdrew her hands from the claw-holes and turned toward the watchers. "Shall I?" she asked half-fearfully.

"Of course!" Bernice's laugh, though reassuring, was strangely breathless.

Nancy plunged her hand into the cavity and drew out the bunch of cotton. With shaking fingers she began pulling the soft stuff apart. As she did so something hard slipped from the mass and tinkled on the tiled floor. It lay there, gleaming softly, until Nancy timidly picked it up and spread it between her two hands.

Bright yellow gold, delicate as fairy lace, formed an intricate pattern of lotus flowers and reeds. The hearts of the flowers were jewels, flashing red and blue and green in the summer sunlight. Two golden clasps, each set



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with an enormous glowing purple amethyst, met to complete a perfect circlet for a slender waist. Surely they had loved their goddess well, those forgotten worshippers who had wrought such a gift for her. "The loveliest jewel I had ever seen" — the words of great-Uncle Peter rang in Nancy's ears.

"It is the Golden Girdle of Isis!" she said simply.

CHAPTER XXII

ALL'S WELL

“But it is incredible — I could never have believed it!” Mr. Charlton was quite startled out of his usual dry calmness, and the gaze he turned upon Nancy was so packed with respect and admiration that she felt herself blushing beneath it. “To think that this little lady here should have succeeded where we older heads had to give up! You must be very proud of yourself, my dear.”

“But I didn’t do it alone,” Nancy protested shyly. “Sister and Natalie made out the message; I wouldn’t have dreamed the professor was talking about tit-tat-toes, from what he said in the book. And it was Natalie’s idea to lay the trap for Ali. And Bernice — oh, I’d have given it up long ago if she hadn’t been with me every step, comforting and encouraging and helping. We all did it, Mr. Charlton.”

“Well, then I congratulate you all,” the old lawyer answered. “Never had any children

myself, Mr. Enfield," he continued to Daddy, who sat beaming proudly on the worn leather couch, with a daughter on either hand. "These girls of yours make an old bachelor see what he has missed. Yours, too, Tom," he added, turning his admiring gaze upon Natalie, who was perched on the arm of her father's chair. "Three mighty fine young people! Well, well!"

Immediately after making their amazing discovery, the girls had broken all rules for once and had run for Daddy. "He won't mind *this* interruption!" Nancy had said gleefully. They had hurried him to the Egyptian Room, all talking at once.

When the excitement died down a little, Daddy, as jubilant as themselves, had suggested that they summon Mr. Charlton and Natalie's father. Both men had assisted in the fruitless search for the girdle, and it seemed right that they should be the first to know of its discovery.

They, too, must be taken to the Egyptian Room and the stone cat's secret revealed. While Bernice was showing them the open crack, she accidentally leaned her weight upon

the scarab seal. Instantly the whirring sound began again, and while they watched the hole slowly closed, and the stone claws rose to their old place. Bubastis stared serenely straight ahead, as he had always done, and there was nothing left to tell of the secret he guarded beneath his enormous paws.

The little party had gathered in the library now, and the whole story had been gone over and over until the three men knew every detail. The cup had been exhibited and the cryptogram explained. The golden girdle had been passed from hand to hand for awestruck admiration, and now lay splendidly glowing on Great-Uncle Peter's desk.

Mr. Enfield broke the little silence that had fallen by saying practically, "We are somewhat puzzled as to just what to do with the jewel, now that we have found it. Perhaps you can help us out, Mr. Charlton."

"Perhaps I can." The old lawyer smiled mysteriously. "As a matter of fact, I have a little surprise, too, although nothing like the one the young ladies have just given us.

"On the day that you told me Ali's story, I dispatched a cablegram to a good friend of

mine, a lawyer also, in the city of London. I asked him to get in touch with the estate of Sir Francis Huddleston, who passed away many years ago, and find out whether the reward offered by Sir Francis for the return of the girdle still stood."

"Then you did believe in it!" Nancy interrupted. "Daddy and Mr. Clarke gave up and said that Great-Uncle Peter must have been wandering in his mind when he wrote the letter. But you still had faith, just — why, just like us!"

"I am very flattered to be classed with youth in this case," the lawyer said, with a dry smile toward the two other men. "Yes, my dear, I had faith. Mr. Hallam was not given to fancies, and it did not seem strange to me that he would devise a difficult hiding-place for his treasure."

"Well, we'll remember this next time," Sheriff Clarke laughed. "If you young women tell me the moon is made of green cheese and I can reach it by jumping, I'll jump and never stop till I can cut me off a slice."

"I also stand convinced," Mr. Enfield said. "But go on, Mr. Charlton."

“ I received a reply from my friend this morning,” the lawyer answered slowly. “ It is quite lengthy; I will give you his information in a few words.

“ He found that the entire estate of Sir Francis Huddleston was left to the British Museum. They have in their possession now the statue of Isis upon which the girdle was originally found, and the Museum authorities are deeply interested in securing the girdle to complete the exhibit. Sir Francis described it at some length in his book, and it will not be difficult for them to identify it. They will send an expert here at once as soon as we can cable them we have found the jewel. If he pronounces it genuine —” Mr. Charlton cleared his throat.

“ Oh, *tell us!*” Bernice breathed.

“ I might explain,” Mr. Charlton went on with tantalizing slowness, “ that Sir Francis Huddleston’s will contained a rather curious provision. He left to the Museum, in trust, the sum of three thousand pounds to be paid to the finders, should the girdle ever be found. The Museum was allowed the use of the interest on this money, but the three thousand pounds itself could never be used for any other purpose.

Sir Francis undoubtedly knew that the girdle had been stolen, and felt confident that it would come to light sooner or later. He was naturally anxious that the British Museum should have the jewel, and so made this provision for it. The Directors of the Museum therefore informed my friend that they would be delighted to turn over this fund to us, should we produce the girdle. And they further state that, as is customary in retrieving stolen property from innocent parties, they will gladly repay to Mr. Hallam's estate the purchase price of the jewel. That sum, as Ali told us, and as we can easily establish from your uncle's records, amounted to ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand dollars — three thousand pounds — why, that's twenty-five thousand dollars!" Bernice exclaimed. "Do you mean they'd really give us all that money for it?"

The lawyer smiled. "Twenty-five thousand dollars is only a fraction of the girdle's real worth, my dear. If your uncle's ownership had been less open to question — I mean, if he had bought it openly in the market-place from its lawful owner, I should certainly advise against letting it go for such a sum. But under the

circumstances, I think that the Museum's offer is a fair one. They cannot use the reward fund for any other purpose, and the interest from it which they have enjoyed all these years amounts to far more than the extra ten thousand dollars. So you see they are actually acquiring this valuable jewel at no cost to themselves, and they are very anxious to close the matter on those terms. Of course you are not bound to accept this offer. I might get you a better one — ”

“ Oh, but twenty-five thousand is *plenty!* ” Bernice interrupted, so earnestly that they all laughed. “ I mean, ” she went on in confusion, “ We could live beautifully on that! You could write your books, Daddy, and take *years* on every chapter if you wanted to. We could stay on here in Rosemont, and Nancy and I could go to college, when we are ready, without your having to worry and fret about where the money was to come from. Why, it's just heaven-sent, isn't it, Daddy? ”

“ It looks like it, ” he admitted. “ The Museum's offer seems to me a fair one, as Mr. Charlton explains it, and there is no denying that we should find the money useful. At the same time, I hardly feel that the matter is one

for me to decide. Suppose we put it up to the heiress here? After all, it's her property we're disposing of. What do you say, Puss?"

All eyes turned to Nancy, where she sat very quiet, with her hand in Bernice's and her head on Daddy's shoulder.

"But of course we'll take it," she said, her blue eyes wide with surprise. "I told you all the time we'd get some money for it, and put it in the bank, so there wouldn't be any more worries. And nobody that wasn't a perfect pig could possibly ask for more than twenty-five thousand dollars! We had more than a million dollars' worth of fun finding it, anyway, and now to get all this real money on top of it — why, it's just like all our dreams come true!"

"And you don't feel the least little pang about giving it up?" Mr. Charlton asked curiously.

"Oh, no!" Nancy's eyes met his serenely. "It's lovely, of course. But I've found it, and looked at it, and tried it on — now let it go back to the poor goddess who really owns it. I expect she's missed it, all these years — I'm glad that she can have it back again."

"That's settled, then." Mr. Charlton rose

and reached for his hat. "I'll cable to London to-night. Better come along with me now, Mr. Enfield, and put the golden girdle in safe deposit at the bank. It's far too valuable to leave lying about."

"I'll walk down with you," Sheriff Clarke offered. "We three weren't smart enough to find it in the first place, but maybe we'll do to guard it until it's in safety."

When Bernice and Natalie came back from seeing them to the door, the library was empty.

"Where in the world —" Natalie began, but Bernice smiled, "I think I know. Come along!"

The door of the Egyptian Room was open, and little Nancy was crouching on the floor, her flushed cheek pressed to the face of the stone cat.

"Dear, dear Bubastis!" she was crooning softly. "Thank you and thank you a thousand times over again! You have been so good to us — Nancy will always love you, darling Bubastis!"

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